Narrative Objects:

Decorative Art in the Museum and the Novel, 1850-1880.

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Abstract:

In the face of financial disaster, Dr Lydgate attempts to share his concerns with his wife, Rosamund, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871). Rosamund's refusal to engage with the crisis, or to sympathise with her husband's despair, is repeatedly presented by Eliot as a preoccupation with inanimate, decorative objects: Rosamund 'turned her neck and looked at a vase on the mantelpiece'.[1] The mid-nineteenth-century novel increasingly explores what it means to own, collect and display objects, and how personal and public lives can be constructed and defined by 'things'.

Recent critical discussion has examined the significance of the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, and the subsequent international exhibitions, as a catalyst for, and an expression of, new ways of producing and consuming objects.[2] These dazzling exhibitions, in conjunction with the foundation of the South Kensington Museum (1857), began to formulate principles of design and models of taste for the public. Increasingly influential, however, was the development of the smaller, regional museum collections of decorative objects which began to emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century. Most of these shared with their national counterparts an intention to educate the public; almost all retained

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[1] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 612.

[2] See, for example, Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition: A Nation on Display* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999) and Andrew Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

the intimacy and distinct authoring of their roots with local collectors.

This thesis draws together common impulses from real and fictional evidence to suggest ways in which people's relationships to their objects were becoming increasingly sophisticated and intimate. It explores the growing role of local municipal museums in presenting manufactured and decorative pieces, in reinforcing moral and social messages around collecting and display, and in popularising decorative 'things' in the home and beyond, while also examining the growing fictional fascination with, and the increasing visibility of, objects in the novel.

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List of Illustrations:

'Do you mean that without my bibelots I'm nothing?'[*]

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[*] Ned Rosier in Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* ed. by Nicola Bradbury (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.562.

INTRODUCTION

Ned Rosier, in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady,* was not alone in fearing that he might be 'nothing' without his 'bibelots'. By the 1880s the complex relationship between a person and his objects - fictional or otherwise - was seen to express a range of private and public meanings. In the thirty years since the Great Exhibition in London, objects had become more and more visible and significant both in fictional texts and in the lives of their readers. Selfhood was being increasingly constructed, defined and interpreted through the collection and display of things. With the growth of commercial displays locally, nationally and internationally; the taste for domestic interiors decorated with an eclectic array of objects; the emergence of a network of local museums and the popularity of a realist fiction which used the concrete detail provided by objects to root characterisations, ideas and environments, the life of things had never been richer. As a contributor to the *Magazine of Art* noted in 1880, decorative art was both 'important' and 'omnipresent' and the fashionable world of the educated middle and wealthy classes was gripped by 'the innate and seemingly irreversible passion for display'.[1]

The core of this thesis grew out of the years I spent working as a curator with the Guild of St George Collection in Sheffield. Created by John Ruskin during the 1870s for the artisan workmen of the city, the collection is an attractive and varied mix of natural history, painting, drawing and photography, books, manuscripts,

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[1] Lewis F. Day, 'Decorative Art I', *Magazine of Art,* 3 (1880), 103-7 (p.107).

plastercasts, coins and objects.[2] It was, and remains, an inspiring educational resource and, while Ruskin may not be the most consistent or reliable of museum guides, his museological experiment was rooted in principles which are still considered important by curators today: physical and intellectual immediacy of the collection; opportunities for close study and contextual research; sensory stimulation. The collecting and display of objects within a museum was for Ruskin a way of initiating social reform and improving the intellectual and moral state of the public: 'The first function of a Museum...is to give example of perfect order and perfect elegance,' he wrote in 1880, 'to the disorderly and rude populace'.[3] It was also, and simultaneously, an opportunity for stimulating the imagination of visitors and nurturing new ways of seeing. The presentation of a variety of objects side by side within the museum environment was to encourage a visual literacy, 'patience in *looking*, and precision in feeling', which would transform the reading of the object into a reading of the natural, manmade and divine world.[4]

Ruskin's approach to his Guild of St George collection was essentially interdisciplinary. He wanted to illustrate to others the connections between things. Learning to look closely at an object, natural or manmade, was for Ruskin the first step in tracing correspondences which might ultimately bring a more refined understanding of the world: 'to see clearly,' he contended, 'is poetry, prophecy and religion, - all in one'.[5] While stopping short of prophecy, and barely touching on

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[2] Still owned by the Guild of St George, the collection is currently administer by Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust, and is on display in the Millennium Galleries in the city centre.

[3] John Ruskin, 'Picture Galleries: Their Function and Formation,' in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E.T.Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library edition, 39 volumes (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), 19, p.226. Further references to this edition will use the short title of *Works*.

[4] John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, ed. by Kenneth Clark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.51.

[5] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters III*, in *Works*, 5, p.333.

poetry and religion, it is the spirit of this interdisciplinary, enquiring approach which I have adopted here in my examination of diverse material. As Ned Rosier's comment and Ruskin's Sheffield venture both demonstrate, the second half of the nineteenth century saw an increasing understanding, and interrogation, of how objects were used and enjoyed. Looking from fiction to museums and back again, my discussion considers the ways in which objects were simultaneously becoming more visible and expressive in a variety of spaces and roles: in the homes people were creating, in the museums they were visiting and in the fiction they were reading.

Mid-Victorian fiction was frequently crammed full of objects in a way that had rarely been seen previously: the development of realist narratives relied, at least in part, on the specific physical detail which objects provided. By the 1860s and 1870s, however, fictional objects were doing more than simply providing the backdrop for convincing domestic settings. The recognition of the intimate bonds between individuals and their things was allowing fiction writers to explore the slippery relationship between an individual's sense of self and the outer signs they presented to others. As Ruskin demonstrated in his own work, the nineteenth-century exploration of visual stimuli was often deeply embedded in the structures and habits of literary discourse. Ruskin's varied interests - from the paintings of Turner to geology - and his eclectic way of approaching the world, were given unity and cohesion through the thirty-nine volumes of his written work. Elsewhere, the growing phenomenon of the object, its increasing role in creating and describing identity and its ability to contribute to, if not produce, personal narratives, meant that objects were also inhabiting a progressively more significant and complex role in

fiction of the period. By considering the portrayal of objects in journals, commentaries and advice handbooks, my thesis explores the widespread changing perceptions and use of objects. Its particular attention to the period's most influential and popular literary form - the novel - also allows, however, a more refined reading of the ways in which the struggle to constitute personal and public identities was mediated through objects.

An approach which draws comparisons between objects on display in public and private spaces, and fictional representations of things, is not unprecedented. Andrew Miller's *Novels Behind Glass* explored the 'commodity fetish' of the nineteenth century in terms of its fictional representations, and the 'penetrating anxiety' of novelists that 'the world was being reduced to a warehouse of goods and commodities, a display window in which people, their actions and their convictions were exhibited for the economic appetites of others'.[6] Thad Logan, too, in her examination of the Victorian parlour, notes that by the 1860s there is 'ample literary evidence' that descriptions of domestic interiors could act as critiques of consumption.[7] Several critics have extended this discussion from a focus on the consumer to include the period's museological developments and have noted the correspondences between the narratives displayed in a museum environment and on the pages of a text. Sophie Forgan in 'The Architecture of Display', which discusses the presentation of Victorian science collections, notes that museum cases

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[6] Andrew Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.6.
[7] Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.84. Despite this claim, however, Logan's book only touches briefly on literary examples and offers no extended readings of literary texts.

'containing this encyclopaedia of knowledge could be read like a textbook,'[8] while

Donald Preziosi, in his examination of collecting, proposes that:

> the museum is one of the most brilliant and powerful genres of modern
> fiction, sharing with other forms of ideological practice – religion, science,
> entertainment, the academic disciplines – a variety of methods for the
> production and factualization of knowledge and its sociopolitical
> consequences.[9]

It is these correspondences between fiction and the museum which interest

me most here, and I have combined a survey of the role of objects in the mid-

Victorian novel with an examination of the growing impact and influence of the

regional museum. Opened in its original Sheffield site in 1875, Ruskin's St George's

Museum, though very much a weapon in his personal crusade to improve the

country's physical, ethical and intellectual condition, was at the same time part of a

widespread and energetic enthusiasm for creating public museums and art galleries of

which Ruskin was only an idiosyncratic part. In London the National Gallery was

opened in 1824, the South Kensington (later the Victoria and Albert) Museum in

1857, the National Portrait Gallery two years later, the Natural History Museum in

1881 and at the end of the century the Tate Gallery (1897). The 1860s, '70s and '80s

also saw the creation and consolidation of a network of regional municipal

collections for the public. It is these early local museums which are considered in this

thesis, in particular, the nascent, often eclectic, collections of what would now largely

be defined as decorative art. Beginning in the early 1850s, when the Great Exhibition

in London (1851) had helped to make decorative objects more visible, desirable and

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[8] Sophie Forgan, 'The Architecture of Display: Museums, Universities and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *History of Science,* 32 (1994), 139-162 (p.148).
[9] Donald Preziosi, 'Collecting/Museums' in *Critical Terms for Art History,* ed. by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 281-291 (p.282).

attainable than ever before, the increasingly influential network of regional museums was to play a fundamental part in the development of more sophisticated and complex attitudes to objects over the following thirty years. These new municipal treasure houses created local contexts for the collection and display of objects outside the home, offering approved structures for viewing them and validating personal choices.

This is not to say that national institutions were not equally, or in some cases perhaps more, influential in shaping public perceptions of objects. The opening of the South Kensington Museum provided for the first time a national showcase for the collection and display of decorative arts which, through an early policy of touring exhibitions and widespread accessibility of the collections, ensured that a broad section of the public was brought within touching distance, sometimes literally, of beautiful and useful things. Although my work clearly intersects with research on the national collection, however, and while my opening chapter discusses the importance of the national context in the development of regional museums, my focus is on local museums outside of London. The evolution and development of the Victoria and Albert Museum is well documented: there was a comprehensive exhibition and publication, *A Grand Design*, in 1987 and Clive Wainwright, among others, has undertaken extensive and detailed research into the growth of the collections.[10] There has been less discussion, however, of the simultaneous growth of the museum movement in towns and cities across the country. As Charles Delheim has pointed

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[10] *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum* ed. by Malcolm Baker and Brenda Richardson (London: V&A publications, 1997). For Wainwright's work on the V&A collections see, for example, the series of articles published posthumously in *Journal of the History of Collections*, 14 (2002).

out, provincial interests were of unprecedented significance in the nineteenth century, creating a boom in local history, archaeology and philosophical societies as well as museums, and mitigating 'the sense of rootlessness produced by abrupt expansion and the sense of inferiority fostered by the lack of respectable pedigrees'.[11] It was within this context of local pride that museums, alongside other civic institutions such as public libraries and parks, came to offer a way of displaying both the best of a city's past and the aspirations for its future.

While most major British towns and cities opened, or began to develop, municipal museum facilities within the period covered by my research, it would not be possible to offer a detailed survey of this activity within the scope of this thesis. I have, where possible, highlighted specific examples within the national picture, but I have chosen to concentrate on a detailed reading of three museums. The most unrepresentative of these is the St George's Museum in Sheffield, which sprang from Ruskin's distinctive worldview. The Museum was, however, in many ways linked to the principles of public education, individual responsibility and social planning which influenced more typical municipal collections. It was also intended by Ruskin as a model for a series of nationwide museums, providing a network of institutions for the British working man. Although every museum inevitably has a particular identity created by a combination of specific factors including location, staff interests and collecting opportunities, my other two examples can be considered as rather more typical of the municipal museum of this period. The Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter and the Castle Museum, Nottingham (known at this period as the

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[11] Charles Delheim, *The Face of the Past: The Preservation of the Medieval Inheritance in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.65.

Midland Counties Museum of Science and Art) both represent early examples of the collection and display of decorative objects, and both demonstrate many of the motives and influences which can be traced in the development of similar museums throughout the country.

The collections and displays of both these Museums continue to evolve, but I have tried to portray them as nearly as possible as they were presented to visitors in the 1860s and 1870s. My discussion of the early Exeter collection, in chapter 2, focuses on the relationship between travel, the acquisition of things and the telling of personal narratives. Exeter's rich and varied collection of objects from abroad - revisited and re-presented to the public in an impressive gallery renovation during the 1990s - offered Victorian visitors sometimes disquieting glimpses of a distant and unsettling world. It is this sense of 'otherness', presented within the apparently secure and permanent environment of the museum, which I want to explore. It is in Chapter 3's discussion of the interchange between private and public display that I concentrate on the example offered by Nottingham. I look at the ways in which objects were displayed in Nottingham's early exhibitions to explore issues around the creation of municipal identity and the continued policing of private taste.

Much of the previous work on Victorian museums and galleries has been directed either at fine art or science, especially natural history, collections.[12] This is as much a reflection of the priority given to these types of collections within museums,

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[12] For discussion of science collections, see, for example, Carla Yanni, *Nature's Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Several critical works trace the growth of local art galleries including, in a wider context, *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. by Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) and Giles Waterfield's fascinating study *Palaces of Art: Art Galleries in Britain 1790-1990* (London: Lavenham Press, 1991).

as of the preferences of individual researchers: many early local museums were founded on a core natural history collection; most cities aspired to have a significant display of painting and sculpture with which to confirm and exhibit their cultural prestige. The display of art and science was, moreover, often separated from the jumble of less 'serious' things and, especially in the case of art, hierarchies were frequently reinforced through the introduction of entrance fees. The original museum in Sunderland, for example, was divided by curtains into rooms which displayed science and art separately and when, in 1880, a separate Art Gallery was proposed, entrance was charged at 6d (with an extra penny for leaving a walking stick) even though the Museum remained free.

My interest for this thesis lies not with 'science' or 'art', but with what the Victorians often perceived as the bottom of the display hierarchy: manufactured objects, domestic decorative wares, tableware, furniture, and ornaments. The display of these 'things' was only newly evident in museums during the mid-nineteenth century, the collections drawn together in rather a piecemeal fashion and occupying an indistinct place on the edge of other more established collections. It was often many years before collections of decorative objects managed to forge their own distinct and separate identity within the museum environment, and many curators were troubled by their equivocal status somewhere between the useful and the beautiful, representing a hybrid that was part indicator of manufacturing progress and commercial enquiry, and part aesthetic construct. Where they *were* displayed, there was frequent confusion about whether to emphasise function or aesthetic value. At the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, for example, a collection of objects donated by the Watcombe terracotta clay company in 1872 - consisting mostly of

small-scale classical statuary, copies of Greek and Egyptian sculpture and vases - was designated to the geology collections where it was displayed simply as evidence of the potential of the raw material. Unauthored and lacking the cultural aura of an established masterpiece, the display of objects was often determined by the tastes of individual curators. Some pieces, especially furniture and clocks, were used as adornment for picture galleries. Examples of modern manufactures from local trades were commonly on display but tended to be the very best, most skilful and innovative pieces rather than the run-of-the-mill production-line objects and might be exhibited alongside sculpted bronzes and prized antiquities.

Even amongst private collectors, the distinctions between new and historical pieces, between the valuable and the simply fashionable, were, by the 1880s, markedly blurred. The craze for blue and white Chinese pots, for example, which was pioneered by artists like Whistler and Rossetti in the 1860s, had become so widespread and popular by the early 1870s that the lively trade in historical imports from China and Japan was substantially supplemented by newly manufactured pieces, in the same style, which might at best have only tenuous links with the Far East. While serious collectors wanted ancient and rare examples, the middle classes, on the lookout for fashionable objects to decorate their domestic interiors, often provided a ready market for objects with a more opaque provenance.

The difficulty in finding a common term for describing these 'things' is itself testament to the ambiguous status many of them occupied. The creation of the South Kensington Museum, for example, was intended to showcase 'modern manufactures', the term emphasising use and practical progress, while Prince Albert, at the founding of the Museum, preferred the more equivocal phrase 'Fine Art

applied to industry'. Other discussions favoured the term 'lesser arts' which, while imposing a hierarchy with the 'higher' arts which appears to denigrate the skills and values inherent in these objects, at least maintains an aesthetic framework within which they could be considered. The expression 'decorative arts', which is usually preferred today, had at this period connotations of house-painting rather than the production or display of collectors' pieces: in 1894, *The Journal of Decorative Art* published in Manchester, and which might have been expected to provide authoritative guidance on fine porcelain or silverware, described itself instead as 'a high class journal for the painter, decorator and art workman'.[13] I have tried to take account of the undefined boundaries and ambiguous status of these early collections of decorative objects in my argument. Indeed, it is precisely because of these uncertain margins and unsettled meanings that, I believe, the object of this period is so worthy of exploration and analysis.

Because many decorative art collections were so new, many of the processes which were at work in their creation and reception necessarily emerged from, and were also evident within, collections from other disciplines. Objects gathered abroad, for example, were in this period frequently displayed within natural history collections, offered as evidence to support theories of evolution. Just as many of the collections and their modes of display were nascent, so too the distinctions between different types of object were often more imprecise than they are in today's museums. So, while my argument does not explore in any detail the importance of

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[13] *Journal of Decorative Art* (1894), p.i. The inclusion of 'art workmen' in the journal's preferred 'high class' readership offers an indication of its aspiration to provide direction on superior domestic design, influenced by the objectives of the Arts and Crafts movement, rather than run-of-the-mill decoration.

science collections, it acknowledges the influence of Darwin and a host of scientific collectors on the development of museums and their philosophy, and I have considered the roots which many decorative art collections shared with natural history and industrial science displays developed by, for example, local literary and philosophical societies. As Jonathan Crary has pointed out, the interrelationship between all forms of nineteenth-century visual language, from paintings to photography to pressed flowers, became so tightly tangled and confused that the consideration of any one type of object must necessarily take some account of the others: 'The circulation and reception of *all* visual imagery is so closely interrelated by the middle of the century that any single medium or form of visual representation no longer has a significant autonomous identity.'[14]

From antiquities to geological specimens, arts and crafts to stuffed animals, the Victorian object was diverse and packed with meaning. It is not my intention to propose that an homogeneous museum culture existed into which all objects and collections were neatly appropriated and within which they were neatly defined. This was a period in which many new and strange objects were becoming publicly visible, through the influences of developments in travel, manufacturing and scientific research. Differences naturally emerged between towns, between the philosophies of particular individuals and between the needs of local audiences and it is difficult to make generalisations about the way in which objects were regarded and displayed. As Asa Briggs has suggested, to assume any kind of unified structure for discussing and presenting these objects would be both naïve and reductive:

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[14] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1990), p.23.

> The Victorians' own consciousness of things...was expressed in different ways, reflecting not only different degrees of understanding and appreciation, but different, sometimes ambivalent or contradictory, reactions...Nor was there any consensus about the design of things, about education in taste, about the evolution of styles or about the values which were associated with consumption or possession.[15]

I hope, instead, to highlight the shifting, embryonic nature of the emerging institutions and collections I discuss, and the opportunities thus offered for people to re-evaluate ordinary objects and renegotiate understandings of what they might represent.

My discussion of objects, and the museums displaying them, necessarily takes account of current scholarly work which examines museums and their collecting practices as instruments of particular ideologies and considers the underlying cultural philosophies governing modes of display.[16] Works such as *Theorizing Museums* and *The Politics of Display,* edited by Sharon MacDonald, and Susan Pearce's research on the nature of collecting and collections, provide a valuable theoretical framework for considering the histories of individual museums and exploring ways in which objects come to be collected, displayed and perceived. The comparatively recent emergence of the museum studies field, however, means that much of the theoretical work is derived from research into twentieth-century examples. The focus of my thesis on a particular thirty-year period in the second half of the nineteenth century means that my reading of museological theory has necessarily been influenced by, and adapted to, a specific historical perspective. During the 1860s and 1870s, when museums were newly emerged or yet in development, many of the practices,

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[15] Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (London: Batsford, 1988), p.32.
[16] See, for example, *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World,* ed. by Sharon MacDonald and Gordon Fyfe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture,* ed. by Sharon MacDonald (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) and Susan Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

influences and models which have interested later commentators were still embryonic and being newly tested against contemporary conditions.

Of the recent critical work on museums, Barbara Black's *On Exhibit* (2000), perhaps applies the most similar methodology to my own by drawing on fictional moments to develop her argument that 'the nineteenth century gave birth to the modern museum'.[17] Although her work shares with this thesis a curiosity about the ways in which museums evolved, their role in the construction of identity and the position of the individual collector, her book deals entirely with developments in the capital and her central premise is that nineteenth-century London and its museums were 'distinctive'.[18] It is, in contrast, the distinctiveness of the regional museums which interests me here and the ways in which they defined themselves against, as well as operating alongside, their national counterparts.

It was not only museums, of course, which offered space for the display of objects during this period, and my thesis also considers the growing fascination with things for the home. During the middle years of the nineteenth century, the middle-class house, as many critics have noted, was increasingly a place for collection and display as people began to negotiate more sophisticated and personal relationships with the objects around them. The development and education of taste was becoming a growing subject for investigation, and its demonstration in the home was coming to be viewed equally as the demonstration of a modern, progressive mind. 'By degrees people are beginning to awaken to the fact,' noted Charles Eastlake in his *Hints on Household Taste* (1878):

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[17] Barbara J. Black, *On Exhibit: Victorians and their Museums* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p.9.
[18] Black, *On Exhibit,* p.6.

that there is a right and a wrong notion of taste in upholstery, in jewellery –
perhaps in millinery, too – and in many other fields which stand apart
from a connoisseurship of what is commonly called 'high art'.[19]

In the second half of the nineteenth century, homes became increasingly cluttered

with objects as the fashion for object-rich decoration conveniently embraced a variety

of preferences: nostalgia for country-house splendour and the old-fashioned order it

implied; the assertion of the progressive town-house style of the newly-rich; the

social conscience of the Arts and Crafts enthusiasts. The choice of objects and the

ways in which they were displayed became a means of locating and identifying

oneself.

In her detailed examination of the most common domestic venue for this

display, the parlour, Thad Logan, claims that this dense massing of ornaments

distinguishes the Victorian home from those preceding and following it: 'it is the

accumulation and display of many...objects that set Victorian interiors apart from

those of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries' she asserts.[20] People's things, and

their relationships to them, were becoming more visible and more inscribed with

individual and social meanings designed to be read by others. At the same time, as

critics have noted, the ideological separation of public and private spaces, of work

and home, and the growing impact of 'new' sciences such as phrenology and

psychiatry, began to change the relationship between the visible and the invisible and

to redefine the limits of identity. As Kate Flint argues, 'identity, rather than being

regarded as something innate, pre-inscribed on the body, was increasingly recognised

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[19] Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in furniture, upholstery and other details* (London:
Longmans, 1878), p.13.
[20] Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.7.

as something which could be deliberately constructed for others to read'.[21] It is within this changing context that the object on domestic display began to be considered in relationship to, and defined against, more public municipal displays. My thesis considers some of the ways in which this relationship developed and the interchanges between the object in the home and in the public display case.

The thread which draws together this diverse material is provided by my consistent, even insistent, return to fictional examples. The way in which objects are used in the novel provides me with a framework for approaching non-fictional material and discussing wider cultural contexts. Not only reflecting, but, more radically, shaping the private and public lives of readers, the mid-nineteenth century novel offers a vivid and refined portrait of the object which allows, and indeed encourages, broad discussion.

A fictional fascination with objects was not entirely new to the nineteenth century, nor exclusive to the thirty years which I consider, and wherever possible I have attempted to provide an earlier context for my argument and to suggest ways in which the impulses identified may have continued and developed in later years. I am also aware that the period saw similar interests reflected in literatures of other languages, Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons* (1848) - whose eponymous hero 'avait passé quarante et quelques années, depuis 1805, à rammasser dans tous les pays, et principalement en Italie, tous ces chefs-d'oevre' – being perhaps the best-known example of a growing European literature which reflected many of the concerns I

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[21] Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.217.

trace in English texts. By exploring a range of these English texts, however, I hope to suggest the comprehensive and widespread nature of the interest, while, where possible, underpinning the breadth of the survey with detailed attention on a particular author for individual chapters.

My first chapter explores the growth of the regional museum from its roots in provincial movements such as the Mechanics' Institutes and Literary and Philosophical Societies. In particular it examines the relationship between the emerging regional network and the more established London museums. It also begins to investigate how these new municipal institutions located themselves at the heart of the changing ways in which objects were being perceived, and suggests ways in which the emerging collections formed part of a burgeoning sense of civic identity.

The second chapter considers how the apparently stable meanings inherent in these regional collections were in fact subject to insecurity and renegotiation. It draws out some of the tensions between the potentially disruptive personal stories on display and the apparent authority and continuity offered by the museum. Its discussion of objects as tangible links to the past, as repositories of history and stimuli to memory is grounded in a detailed examination of George Eliot's novels. Eliot's concern with the influence of the past on both personal and social narratives, and her preoccupation with the growth of the individual within the confines of historical pressures, makes her work singularly appropriate to this argument.

In the third chapter, my focus moves to the display of objects in the home. It uses Elizabeth Gaskell's novels of domestic life as a foundation for the discussion of the increasing significance of personal display, and the interchange between private display spaces and the emerging museums. It considers the ways in which taste was

formulated, perceived and exhibited by middle-class families and how the increasingly sophisticated understanding of the nature of subjectivity produced a growing awareness of the slippery significances of display. Gaskell appears again in Chapter 4, which extends the discussion on display to consider fictional motifs of showing and hiding. This chapter also draws on Dickens's late fiction, in particular *Our Mutual Friend*, to investigate ideas around the perceived moral significances of display.

Chapter 5 examines Ruskin's museological experiment with the St George's Museum in Sheffield. As well as offering a detailed reading of the museum and its collection, its emergence from the idealistic Guild of St George and its conception of the 'artizan' visitor who might use it, the chapter explores the essentially literary nature of Ruskin's museum. It suggests that the St George's Museum offered a unique conjunction of the visual and the textual, and considers it as a Ruskinian document, intrinsically linked to the distinctive and fluctuating relationship Ruskin had shared with the readers of his writing.

Extending the discussion from Ruskin as an idiosyncratic collector to the nature of collectors and collecting in more general terms, Chapter 6 returns to a focus on fiction, examining in particular Henry James's early novels. It explores the habits and impulses of fictional and real collectors, in the home and in the museum, to suggest a growing popular fascination with the object and an increasing visibility of both the collector and the things they collected.

Drawing upon a variety of sources, therefore, and through wide-ranging discussion, this thesis brings together disciplines which have at their heart the study of the object. It explores what Kate Flint, in her examination of Victorian visual

culture, calls 'the increasingly commodified world of the Victorians' and investigates 'the significations of the object which [have] endured into our own times'.[22] My consideration of these multiple significations proposes contexts for reading objects and the texts in which they appear and examines how personal and municipal identities were forged through collecting and display. It offers, finally, a reading of the Victorian relationship to objects in which commodification sits alongside more profound associations coupled to memory, selfhood and desire.

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[22] Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, p.217.

1. Writing the Museum:
The Union of the Useful with the Beautiful.

If then, we help to raise the general standard of taste by vigilant watchfulness over all the means that are in course of erection for the diffusion of sound art, and for the union of the useful with the beautiful, we may claim consideration as good servants of our country and of our race.[1]

The boom in regional museum building, collecting and visiting which can be seen during the second half of the nineteenth century had its roots in longer-established movements for public education and entertainment. By the 1820s and 1830s the research, discussion and circulation of methods and principles in disciplines as diverse as geology and phrenology had become so popular, and so embedded in middle-class culture, that a network of institutes, societies and associations had developed to service it. Inevitably, perhaps, this enthusiasm also allowed for the examination and display of a range of other material, often with the focus on pleasure as well as instruction. In particular, the growing concern over the 'general standard of taste' and the recognition that 'vigilant watchfulness' was required to police it, meant that many of the organisations that had been founded to examine developments in natural history or mechanical apparatus extended their interests to the discussion and exhibition of manufacturing wares, household goods and decorative art.

One of the most influential of these early movements was the comprehensive network of Mechanics' Institutes. By the 1850s there were over seven hundred

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[1] Editorial, *Art Pictorial and Industrial*, 1:1 (1872), p.2.

Institutes across Great Britain, boasting over half a million members.[2] The earliest

had been established in the early 1820s in major industrial centres like Glasgow,

Manchester, Sheffield and London. By 1830 smaller towns like Ashton-under-Lyne,

Halifax and Bolton (1825), Derby (1826) and Coventry (1828) all had active

Institutes and within another decade the movement had spread to the smallest of

towns and even rural villages. Usually structured around library facilities and a series

of classes and lectures, the Mechanics' Institutes were originally intended, as the

name suggests, to offer practical instruction to the working man. As many critics

have noted, however, many soon became a means for aspirational white-collar

workers to advance themselves in the social and professional hierarchy, while also

acting as meeting places for the middle classes: of the 500 members of the Sheffield

Mechanics' Institute in 1836, for example, only half could be defined as working

class, while the *Manchester Guardian* claimed in 1849 that of the 32 Mechanics'

Institutes in Lancashire and Cheshire there were only 4 in which the working class

were interested and to which they gave their support.[3] In his evidence to the

government Select Committee on the Arts and Manufactures in 1835, the vice

president of the London Mechanics' institute, Charles Toplis, reported that even in

the capital only a third of students were 'working mechanics', while lectures in more

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[2] It is difficult to be sure of accurate figures since membership, and the number of institutes, as well as their nomenclature, was constantly changing. In addition to Mechanics' Institutes there were, for example, Mutual Improvement Societies, Institutes for the Advancement of Knowledge, People's Colleges and Artisans' Institutes. W.A. Munford gives a figure of 610 institutions of the type of Mechanics' Institutes in England as well as 12 in Wales, 55 in Scotland and 25 in Ireland and Jeffrey Auerbach suggests there were 600 Institutes with half a million members. See, W.A. Munford, 'George Birbeck and the Mechanics' Institutes', in *English Libraries 1800-1850: Three Lectures delivered at University College, London* (London: Lewis, 1958) and J. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).
[3] Mabel Tylecote, *The Mechanics' Institutes of Lancashire and Yorkshire before 1851* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957), pp.69-75.

refined subjects such as drawing, French and Latin were becoming increasingly popular.[4]

The nature of the institutes necessarily varied according to local conditions, and some were inevitably more radical in their membership than others: Ian Inkster, for example, draws attention to the marked differences between the Institute in Ancoats, Manchester, established in 1838, an 'independent, working-class instruction society' and the Wakefield Institute which emerged in 1841 from the roots of the Literary and Philosophical Society and through which the town's elite offered activities such as concerts, chess and cricket.[5] While these variations, and the absence of complete records of national activity, make it difficult to assume a single homogenous pattern of class interaction within the Mechanics' Institutes, there is some evidence that they quickly became part of a middle-class way of life, embracing a middle-class membership and addressing working-class problems such as education and living conditions from a middle-class perspective. They were, claims Inkster, 'despite their name, part of a profound, provincial-based middle-class culture and institutional network which flourished in England'.[6] Mabel Tylecote notes in her history of the Lancashire and Yorkshire movement that 'manual workers rarely established themselves in force in any of those institutions which were built to the conventional pattern'.[7] The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK), founded in 1826 to facilitate the publication of useful treatises and pamphlets, published 'A Manual for Mechanics' Institutes' from 1839 which, along with model

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[4] W.A. Munford, 'George Birbeck and the Mechanics' Institutes', p.40.
[5] Ian Inkster, 'The Social Context of an Educational Movement: A Revisionist Approach to the English Mechanics' Institutes, 1820-1850', *Oxford Review of Education*, 2 (1976), 277-307 (p.281).
[6] ibid, p.284.
[7] Mabel Tylecote, *The Mechanics' Institutes of Lancashire and Yorkshire before 1851*, p.74.

rules and regulations, lists of appropriate titles for stocking a library and even floor

plans for the ideal Institute, aimed at providing information to a working-class

readership. Again, however, it was the middle classes which provided the backbone

of its distribution lists and the SDUK's 1841 'Report on the State of Literary,

Scientific and Mechanics' Institutes' found that the potential working-class audience

was still largely unimpressed.[8]

One of the results of this change in the class profile of the membership was

the increasing number of exhibitions organised by the network of Mechanics'

Institutes. No longer confined to providing practical instruction, a number of

committees turned their attention to the arts and chose to offer a range of activities

including concerts and musical events and, especially in the manufacturing centres,

displays of objects. While these retained a notional educational purpose, they were

also plainly for the entertainment and amusement of members. In some cases the

displays were scientific in nature, often with a strong natural history element, but

many focussed on the exhibition of manufactured, decorative things: in 1839 Leeds

Mechanics' Institute organised an exhibition of 'arts and manufactures' while in

1848 Huddersfield described its effort as 'a polytechnic exhibition on a small

scale...[of] pictures and other works of Art and objects of curiosity and interest'.[9]

Perhaps the most actively enthusiastic of the Institutes was Manchester, which

organised five exhibitions, the first from December 1837 to February 1838, and the

last finishing in Spring 1845. These eclectic displays included everything from

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[8] W.A. Munford, 'George Birbeck and the Mechanics' Institutes', p.50. The SDUK also sponsored unions of individual Institutes - e.g. Yorkshire; Lancashire and Cheshire; Midland (1847); North and Scottish (1848).
[9] Qtd Mabel Tylecote, *The Mechanics' Institutes of Lancashire and Yorkshire before 1851*, p.221.

models of steam engines, ships and public buildings, to paintings, phrenology, anatomy and geology, but the first exhibition was typical in also featuring over 400 'Specimens of beautiful manufactures and of Superior workmanship in the Arts'. The Institute's annual report of 1839 was in no doubt that the display of objects was beneficial to both its members and a wider audience: '[it] must tend to diffuse taste for the correct and beautiful in the productions of art and manufactures which cannot but form important agents for increasing the improvement and happiness of the mass of society' it noted.[10]

It was not only the organisers of the exhibitions, however, who were enthusiastic. The public visited in large numbers, and the income from their entrance fees allowed many of the Mechanics' Institutes to improve or expand their facilities. The Leeds exhibition of 1839, for example, attracted almost 200,000 visitors generating a profit of £1,630 which allowed the purchase of larger, more salubrious, premises. Over 100,000 visited the display in Halifax in 1840 and the first Manchester exhibition attracted over 50,000 visitors in its five weeks, a number which was to double in subsequent years. Proof of the popularity of these exhibitions came, ironically, in the decision by most Institutes during the 1840s and 1850s to stop holding them - the number of visitors, the increasing sophistication of the exhibits and the demand for ever more extensive displays caused widespread disruption to the normal work of the Institutes, appropriating classrooms, interrupting lectures and sapping manpower. The Yorkshire Union of Mechanics Institutes reported in 1844 that their exhibitions were to be halted 'owing to the incessant engagement of several of its Members in the exhibition at Leeds', while the end of

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[10] ibid. p.96.

the Manchester series of exhibitions, despite an unsuccessful campaign by the *Manchester Guardian* to reinstate them, was partly attributed to the time-consuming work of sourcing exhibits from as far afield as the Board of Ordnance and the Central School of Design in London.[11]

Alongside the Mechanics' Institutes, which catered ostensibly at least for the working and lower classes, many cities had established Literary and Philosophical Societies which often had their roots in the eighteenth century.[12] Part academic society and part gentleman's club, these, like the Mechanics' Institutes, usually offered members library facilities as well as lectures, debates and social events, but were largely aimed at the educated, influential classes which presided over the growing cities. They were not, however, divorced from practical progress and by the 1830s were offering a kind of hybrid representing utilitarian, even industrial, interests but retaining an air of genteel debate. While they were influential in the 'extreme popularity of provincial and metropolitan science in the 1790s and late 1820s to early 1830s', for example, this was often closely linked to practical results.[13] In Birmingham the Society noted with pleasure that:

> the various lectures that have been delivered by the different fellows of this society on mechanism, chemistry, mineralogy and metallurgy, have produced very beneficial effects, and contributed in a considerable degree to the improvement of gilding, plating, bronzing, vitrification and metallic combinations.[14]

Although, as Inkster has noted, this breadth of interest tended to create

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[11] Annual Report, Yorkshire Union of Mechanics' Institutes 1844, p.8.

[12] Most of the major Societies (Manchester, Newcastle, Derby etc) were 'Literary and Philosophical' but there were exceptions: Leeds, for example, preferred to title itself 'Philosophical and Literary'.

[13] *Metropolis and Province, Science in British Culture 1780-1850*, ed. by Ian Inkster and Jack Morrell (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p.19. Inkster discusses in some detail the class implications of the Literary and Philosophical Societies in respect of scientific experimentation and discourse.

[14] qtd. Inkster, 'The Social Context of an Educational Movement', p.11.

'centres of overt class friction', and tensions between those members wanting a reading club and those wanting a scientific society, it also produced further opportunities for provincial displays.[15] In an effort to offer visual evidence in support of the research and debates taking place, some Literary and Philosophical Societies formed and housed collections, often with a core of natural history objects, but becoming increasingly varied as a result of local donations. In some cases the presentation of these collections quickly took the form of separate subscription museums - Sunderland launched a subscription Museum in 1810 with 36 subscribers, although it lasted barely a decade before closing - but they tended to be more successful when integrated with the wider work of the Society.[16] Newcastle Lit and Phil, for example, opened a special 'Museum Room' in 1826 to show the 'Wycliffe Museum' of books, manuscripts, prints, natural history and stuffed birds which had first been brought together by local collector Marmaduke Tunstall in the 1770s and 1780s. A year after opening the Museum, the Lit and Phil produced a catalogue to the collection and by 1829 had formed a special Museum Committee, although financial constraints forced the Museum into a separate building by the mid-1830s in a co-operative arrangement with the city's Natural History Society.[17] The importance of Literary and Philosophical Societies as the basis for many local museum facilities was to continue throughout the century and beyond, with the collection of Leeds Phil

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[15] ibid., p.32.

[16] For further details of the Sunderland Subscription Museum and Library see L. Jessop and N.T. Sinclair, *Sunderland Museum: The People's Palace in the Park* (Sunderland: Tyne and Wear Museums, 1996), pp.2-3.

[17] For further discussion of the early history of the Wycliffe Museum and the evolution of the Newcastle Museum see John Philipson, 'The Sebroke Crozier and the Nineteenth-Century Newcastle Museum', in Charles Parish, *The History of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne* (Newcastle: Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 1990), pp.197-216.

and Lit, for example, becoming the foundation of the City Museum in 1921.

In addition to the displays offered by local institutes and societies, some larger centres also developed substantial municipal temporary exhibitions of modern objects to promote the name and manufacturing prowess of the city. In 1846, *Art Union* carried a report of an event in Manchester, 'the first pure Exposition of Industrial Art, exclusively for its own sake, which has ever been held in England'.[18] In clear imitation of French 'expositions' of trade manufactures (which had been taking place at four to five yearly intervals since the beginning of the century, and which included the Paris Exposition two years earlier), the claims for the Manchester exhibition emphasised municipal pride and ambition:

> An Exposition of the products of National Industry is opened in the Metropolis of our most important National productions. Manchester has asserted its claims to be the capital of England's manufactures by giving to manufacturers an opportunity of showing that they labour not merely for physical comfort, but for the mental advancement of the people, and that while they promote convenience, they advance intellectual improvement...The purpose of the Exposition is to display the effect of Ornamental Design in the Useful Arts.[19]

Three years later, not to be outdone, Birmingham followed suit with a similar show developed by The British Association for the Advancement of Science.

It was into this tradition of staging small, provincial exhibitions to educate local people and boost local pride that the regional museums slotted. The Museums Act of 1845 and the Museums and Libraries Act of 1850, which allowed borough councils to raise up to a halfpenny on the rates for public amenities, produced structured opportunities for creating regional museums and making permanent the

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[18] *Art Union*, 8 (January 1846), p. 23.
[19] ibid.

display of objects in a local context. In Sunderland, for example, one of the towns quickest to take advantage of the new act (perhaps because of its earlier experience with its Subscription Museum), the decision to establish a public museum was taken as early as May 1846, an honorary curator being appointed that autumn and a halfpenny levied on the rates from early November. Warrington also took advantage of the new acts to open a rates-funded museum in 1848, and the town council in Colchester agreed in April 1846 to provide a place 'for the deposit of articles of antiquity or curiosity intended for a museum to be erected in this town', although a museum was not finally opened to the public until September 1860.[20]

Although, even after the Acts, public money could only be used for acquiring a site or building, rather than buying and maintaining a collection, authorities were able to use the new public funds to expand existing active cultural platforms. Since many Literary and Philosophical Societies were by this time suffering severe financial difficulties they were often grateful for the opportunity to contribute to, or even merge with, the new municipal museums: in both Sheffield and Preston, for example, objects from the Literary and Philosophical Societies formed the core of the emerging public collections. While the Mechanics' Institutes tended to continue alongside the nascent museums, here again the Acts provided for increasingly formalised sharing of activities. Many towns found it difficult to maintain membership for an Institute, especially during periods of economic hardship: Bradford, Stockport and Huddersfield Institutes were all founded in 1825 and had all failed by the early 1830s; Oldham was founded in 1830 and had folded within a year;

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[20] L. Jessop and N.T. Sinclair, *The Sunderland Museum: The People's Palace in the Park*, p.5.

Sheffield Mechanics' Institute opened in 1832 with 1,121 members but a year later had only 464. Increasingly the public museums shored up, or even supplanted, these faltering activities, offering facilities for education and improvement without the need for a financial commitment in the form of annual subscription.

Given their roots, it is not surprising that there was commonly a strong provincial character to the objects on display in these emerging museums, reflecting regional industries and interests, and that there was already a sense of ownership among local people who viewed their museum facilities with pride and visited in large numbers. In Sunderland, for example, loan exhibitions proved so popular that the North Eastern Railway Company supplied special trains for visitors while the original Museum building was deemed inadequate for the volume of visitors just fifteen years after its opening in 1879 and plans were drawn up for an extension. In addition, the launch of a new museum proved a newsworthy opportunity for publicising municipal success in the local and even national press. In 1868, for example, *Art Journal* reported on a small display 'opened some time since' in Darwen, Lancashire: 'the contributions of...works of Industrial Art are extensive and of great importance,' it noted.[21] Two years later, in August 1870, it was praising the citizens of Birmingham for 'at last' opening a museum of decorative objects:

> At last the great centre of the ornamental metal manufacturers of England recognises the importance of a collective assemblage of objects of Art-industry by way of stimulating its artisans and improving the Art-features of the products of its manufactories...The influence of such museums we have ever advocated as an essential element in the progress of art as applied to industry.[22]

So enthusiastic was the rivalry between competing provincial centres determined not

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[21] *Art Journal*, 7 (July 1868), p.143.
[22] *Art Journal*, 9 (August 1870), p.248.

to be left behind in the development of these museums, that by the middle of the 1880s Warrington, Exeter, Nottingham, Brighton, Liverpool, Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Sheffield, Aberdeen, Leeds, Sunderland and Preston were all among those towns which had developed substantial public collections for display. In 1878, Nottingham won the highest praise from the *Magazine of Art* – and was pronounced winner of 'the race' for municipal museums – for its decision to be locally independent of touring collections from larger London museums. It would rely instead on the 'good-will' of local collectors and 'the close attention of the Corporation of Nottingham':

> ...instead of relying in chief upon the aid which the mother institution in the metropolis could afford to give, Nottingham has, at a single stride, outstripped all the towns in the U-K- in the race to provide themselves with local museums.[23]

As this report suggests, the relationship between the growing network of regional museums and their larger counterparts in London was a complex one. In his discussion of Mechanics' Institutes and Literary and Philosophical Societies, Ian Inkster emphasises the fiercely provincial nature of the movements. He also identifies a fluctuating association between the provinces and the capital during the late 18th and early 19th centuries: resentment between the two prior to the 1790s; a change to admiration and emulation on the part of the provinces during 1790-1800, and then a return to suspicion and dislike from 1800-1830. Following these periods of vacillation, however, he concludes that there existed 'a prideful independent provincialism during the 1830s and beyond' and that many models for the growing

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[23] *Magazine of Art,* 1 (1878), p.154. This volume, the first, enthusiastically reviewed a number of museums, including the South Kensington Museum and Ruskin's newly-opened St George's Museum in Sheffield.

cities owed more to the imitation of other provincial centres than the capital.[24] Along with organisations like the Lit and Phils, the emerging museums were certainly part of the growing movement by the rising provincial elite to create and reinforce a vibrant city image but for many, this powerful provincialism was tempered by the importance of London's South Kensington Museum, in particular, to their development. Its policy of touring collections of objects outside the capital enabled many cities to develop audiences for displays which, in turn, provided enough enthusiasm and support to begin the campaign for a permanent local museum.[25] Between 1854 and 1870 loans from the South Kensington Museum were made fourteen times to Sheffield, ten times to Birmingham, eight times to Liverpool and Nottingham and seven times to Leeds. At the Mechanics' Institute in Manchester in 1845, for example, the South Kensington Museum showed 'specimens of art and design, both in textile fabrics, bronze, iron and other metal castings, porcelain, and earthenware' before the whole collection was packed up and 'forwarded to Glasgow'.[26] By the time the exhibition arrived in Nottingham a year later, *Art Union* was reporting that the objects 'had been exhibited in nearly all the towns where [design] schools have been established and have attracted much attention on the part of the public having been inspected by tens of thousands'.[27]

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[24] Inkster, 'The Social Context of an Educational Movement', p.35.

[25] The exhibitions were scheduled for a limited period in each town. The objects were specially packed for the tour and there was an accompanying catalogue. Most of the venues were provincial design schools, outposts of the School of Design set up in Somerset House, London following the report of the 1835 Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures. For discussion of the evolution of the School of Design and its influence on the development of the South Kensington Museum see Clive Wainwright, 'The Making of the South Kensington Museum I: The Government Schools of Design and the Founding Collection, 1837-51', *The Journal of the History of Collections*, 14:1 (2002), 3-23.

[26] Cutting annotated 'Some Manchester News (Times?) 1845', in scrapbook of George Wallis, vol II, p.81, the Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum, qtd in Clive Wainwright, 'The Making of the South Kensington Museum I', p.19.

[27] *Art Union*, 8 (January 1846), p.17.

Despite the example of these touring exhibitions, however, there were numerous complaints from the regions, as today, that all the investment was directed at London Museums and their collections, which remained inaccessible and of limited use to those elsewhere. With a groundswell of local support, and under the prompting of municipal pride, many towns, like Nottingham, were keen to assert their independence and to begin forming collections specific to local and regional interests rather than focussing on the objects of foreign design usually highlighted by the South Kensington displays. Meanwhile, for the professionals in London, the activities of regional museums were often a source more of amusement than of serious interest. Sophie Forgan's comment that 'provincial museums with their miscellaneous collections were a particular target for metropolitan jibes' was equally as true for the displays of decorative objects as for the science collections she explores.[28] Writing in 1888, for example, Thomas Greenwood, historian and commentator, felt that 'provincial museums are usually little else than collections of curiosities, falling far short of the original significance of the name'[29] and an extract from a report of the 1874 Royal Commission emphasises the lingering impression of amateurism and muddle which local museums raised in London minds:

> The only label attached to nine specimens out of ten is, "presented by Mr. or Mrs. So-and-so," the objects of the presentation having been either to cherish a glow of self-satisfaction in the bosom of the donor, or to get rid under the semblance of doing a good action of rubbish that had once been prized, but latterly had stood in the way.[30]

One of the reasons the ambitious regionals found the disdain of their London

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[28] Sophie Forgan, 'The Architecture of Display: Museums, Universities and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *History of Science,* 32 (1994), 139-155 (p.149).

[29] Thomas Greenwood, *Museums and Art Galleries* (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1888), p.70.

[30] Royal Commission on Scientific Instruction and the Advancement of Science (Devonshire Commission), 4th Report, p.14, qtd in Sophie Forgan, pp.149-150.

counterparts so difficult to stomach was the growing national realisation that, in fact, the capital's Museums were failing their visitors. Daunted by conservative church opposition, and suffering from lack of funds and staff, the national museums were, for example, the last to offer Sunday opening. Concerns about security, and especially the hazards of gas lighting within the museum, also meant that evening opening was severely restricted. This caused particular resentment since it made the capital's museums all but inaccessible to the working classes. In *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), Dickens intimately associates 'a Sunday evening in London, gloomy, close and stale', with the dark, locked rooms of the British Museum:

> Everything was bolted and barred that could by possibility furnish relief to an overworked people. No pictures, no unfamiliar animals, no rare plants or flowers, no natural or artificial wonders of the ancient world – all *taboo* with that enlightened strictness, that the ugly South Sea gods in the British Museum might have supposed themselves at home again. Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets.[31]

Over forty years later, writers were still campaigning for increased opening. In *The Nether World* (1889), for example, George Gissing explains that 'years ago' Bob Hewitt's father had taken him on a public holiday - presumably the only possible visiting day for a working man - to visit the British Museum. As a young man, Bob returns on a whim with his friend Clem, and makes a similar tour.

> [he] was surprised at the show of information his memory allowed him to make – desperately vague and often ludicrously wide of the mark, but still a something of knowledge, retained from all sorts of chance encounters by his capable mind. Had the British Museum been open to visitors in the hours of the evening, or on Sundays, Bob Hewitt would possibly have been employing his leisure nowadays in more profitable pursuits.[32]

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[31] Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit,* ed. by Stephen Wall and Helen Small (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), p.67.
[32] George Gissing, *The Nether World,* ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.220.

This popular resentment of lost opportunity reached beyond the campaign for extended opening hours to demands for a complete reorganisation of the National Gallery and the British Museum which were considered disordered and ill-managed: in 1860, for example, *Chambers Journal* suggested that there was not 'a single department' of the British Museum, except the Library, 'that is not cribbed, cabined and confined...Unless it is to degenerate into a gigantic curiosity shop, it is high time something was done to remedy the evil'.[33] Little was done, however, and two years later *The London Review* described the objects as still 'so crowded together as to be rendered almost useless'.[34] Between 1850 and 1860 a number of parliamentary enquiries and Royal commissions, discussing everything from the space in the galleries to conservation requirements for the collections, considered what could be done to improve standards. Letters flashed back and forth in the press discussing the poor state of the London Museums and influential critics like John Ruskin weighed in with their opinions. Ruskin was a vocal contributor to the enquiries into the future of the National Gallery, for example, including the 1857 Site Commission at which he complained of the 'straining effort' a visit required, and the 'continual change of temper and of tone of thought' occasioned by the existing arrangement of works.[35]

Ruskin reserved particular opprobrium for the South Kensington Museum, where, he claimed, 'fragments of really true and precious art are buried and polluted amidst a mass of loathsome modern mechanisms, fineries and fatuity'.[36] He was far from alone, however, in his criticism, although many other contemporary critics were

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[33] 'The Mausoleum Marbles', *Chambers Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, 317 (28 January 1860), 49-52 (p.52).

[34] 'The British Museum', *The London Review of Politics, Society, Literature, Art and Science*, 29 (March 1862), 304-5 (p.304).

[35] John Ruskin, Evidence to the 1857 National Gallery Site Commission, in *Works*, 12, pp.412-3.

[36] John Ruskin, Appendix to *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 58, October 1875, in *Works*, 29, p.560.

concerned that there were becoming too few, rather than too many, 'loathsome modern mechanisms'. Founded on the small collection of the government School of Design which opened in 1836 and began collecting during the 1840s, the Museum really came into being when, boosted by a large number of acquisitions from the 1851 Great Exhibition, the collection was first opened to the general public in Marlborough House in 1852, later moving to South Kensington in 1857.[37] It was intended as an educational resource, to provide models of good design for British manufacturers and to improve the taste of the public through exposure to high quality objects. 'The Museum is intended to be used, and to the utmost extent consistent with the preservation of the articles; and not only to be used physically, but to be talked about and lectured upon,' declared the first Director, Henry Cole, and on 'students days', for a fee of sixpence and on washing their hands, any visitor could ask to handle any object which would be removed from its case for closer inspection.[38] In many ways it was a pioneering project: its focus on modern manufactures, especially those from abroad, was unique and the passionate educational ideals of Henry Cole rooted the Museum in practical utility. It was committed to attracting large numbers of visitors from different social classes: public transport was laid on via a special station, it opened the first Museum restaurant in 1857 and it offered free entrance two days and three evenings a week.[39]

Within a short time, however, many contemporary visitors began to feel that

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[37] The School of Design Collection included important modern pieces from the Paris Exposition of 1844. For an excellent and detailed discussion of the evolution of the Museum and its collections, see Clive Wainwright's series of articles, *Journal of the History of Collections,* 14 (2002).

[38] For further discussion see Anthony Burton, 'The Uses of the South Kensington Art Collections', *The Journal of the History of Collections,* 14 (2002), 79-95.

[39] Michael Conforti, 'The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts' in *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum,* ed. by Malcolm Baker and Brenda Richardson, p.30.

the Museum had lost its way. By the early 1860s, the intention to instruct the public

had evolved into a less didactic, but essentially unfocussed, hope that the collections

might somehow inspire the required changes in taste and values. The original desire

to inculcate correct principles of design through practical experience had become a

more obscure mission to cultivate a refined sensibility which would, in time, have

some kind of beneficial effect. As early as 1854, in a lecture on the new Museum, its

first curator, J.C. Robinson, was already sounding a note of defeat and expounding

the virtues of 'the silent, refining influence' of a visit, rather than a guided

educational experience:

> Whilst the fact is obvious that the public is very ignorant in these matters,
> and that active teaching is impracticable, what is there to trust to but the
> silent refining influence of the monuments of Art themselves? - Render
> such on all hands accessible to the people, and a passive teaching will be the
> result, scarcely less effectual than the active study, which we admit it is in
> vain for them to take in hand.[40]

The collecting policy of Robinson himself, perhaps with 'passive teaching' in mind,

was also the focus of much contemporary criticism. While Ruskin was launching his

attack on the display of 'loathsome modern mechanisms,' it was these modern pieces

which had been at the heart of Cole's vision for educating the public. Like Ruskin,

Robinson's personal taste was for historical objects rather than for modern

manufactures and the nature of the collection shifted as he bought numerous, and

expensive, historic European pieces.[41] While there was some agreement that student

designers could perhaps learn effectively from models from the past (and that French

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[40] J.C.Robinson, *An Introductory Lecture on the Museum of Ornamental Art of the Department*, qtd in Anthony Burton, 'The Uses of the South Kensington Art Collections', p.85.
[41] Robinson was himself a collector, and at times his own interests were considered at odds with those of the Museum. In the 1890s he published a series of retrospective articles which indicated that he was unimpressed by the original educational mission of the Museum and was more interested in his own efforts as a collector.

design was so dominant precisely because French students assiduously studied and copied historical pieces), the policy was less useful to the general public which, it was felt, was better served by exposure to modern examples.

With the change in emphasis, the simple and direct teaching strategy that had presented visitors with a range of items which they were told to like (or dislike) became more complicated and opaque, since many of the historical pieces were resistant to straightforward categorisation according to Cole's design principles. Collecting for educational purposes had evolved into collecting as an end in itself, with growing amounts being spent annually on increasingly rare and expensive objects. By 1865, *Art Journal* was chastising South Kensington for 'reckless and useless expenditure' which was no longer directed at creating collections for 'students of manufacture' but for a 'collector's' taste for rare specimens. It went on:

> it is evident that this museum is rapidly forgetting its origin and use, and is becoming a serious tax upon the country for the purchase of very expensive curiosities which have no right to a resting-place under its roof.[42]

Nor was it only the collections which came under attack. The building itself, with its elaborate tiled stairways and Victorian gothic aesthetic, was considered by some an inappropriate setting for the serious study of the objects on display: 'the beautiful objects contained in the museum are lost in the incongruous gaudiness of the decorations, and the attention is distracted from them,' suggested *The London Review* in 1866.[43] As the criticism continued on all fronts, what emerged was a general lack of public respect for the Museum as a whole and a growing sense that it offered 'a dumping ground for collections that could not be accommodated elsewhere, rather

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[42] *Art Journal*, 7 (September 1865), p.282.
[43] 'The National School of Design', *The London Review of Politics, Society, Literature, Art and Science,* 13 (14 July 1866), 44-45 (p.45).

than a sister institution to the National Gallery'.[44]

While South Kensington may have been struggling, however, to provide the perfect practical model for the emerging museums in the regions, it remained highly influential on the way visitors perceived and valued objects. Although the kernel of the collections had been in existence before the Great Exhibition, the impression that it was the 1851 event which launched the Museum is in some ways helpful, since many of the habits of presenting objects were common to both the glitzy London show and the South Kensington experiment. In both displays, for example, there was a tendency for pieces to appear self-sufficient, with the practical, economic and political processes of production suppressed – at the Great Exhibition visitors were invited to wonder rather than make detailed examination (there were few labels), and at South Kensington the guide books which appeared from the early 1860s told visitors only where to find objects rather than offering extensive information. Perhaps more significantly, however, the dazzling, high-profile displays within these two mid-Victorian treasure houses began to alter people's perception of objects. There was a growing sense that alongside the impressive spectacle, the collecting and display of things was a serious, public affair. So, as we have seen, *The London Review* considered the gaudy decoration of the Museum to be 'incongruous' to the consideration of 'beautiful objects,' a distraction from a solemn, instructional experience. Meanwhile, amongst the general public, there was an increasing appreciation that the display of objects could have a profound personal and social effect. As Thomas Richards has noted:

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[44] Giles Waterfield, *Palaces of Art: Art Galleries in Britain 1790-1990* (London: Lavenham Press, 1990), p.24.

So awestruck were people by the Crystal Palace that they actually began to believe in the transformative power of interior decoration, whereby the arrangement and presentation of manufactured objects becomes not only a model for human habitation but also a blueprint for social change.[45]

The underlying sense that the displays of the Great Exhibition were so powerful as to be potentially disruptive, and even revolutionary, was a recurring theme in contemporary commentaries. '"Meditations in the Exhibition" by Mr Doldrums' which appeared in *Punch* was just one example of a continuing wariness about the effect the array of objects might have on the desires of the lower classes:

> The people's taste they may refine;
> But, on the other hand, 'tis clear
> They'll cause the masses to repine,
> And wish to live above their sphere.[46]

The possession of a more refined taste was linked to the destabilising effects of a more eager popular acquisitiveness which threatened to erode the accepted distinctions between classes. There was also a pressing middle-class fear of a gradually increasing and widespread leisure time that, undirected, would encourage the working classes to crime. In 1860, the opening of Manchester's free libraries, for example, was heralded by *Chambers Journal* as a good solution to prevent unrest and the undermining of 'civilization':

> As it is almost certain that the progress of civilization will produce more and more leisure to the human race, it becomes a subject of the first importance to provide means for occupying that leisure in moral and intellectual progress.[47]

The aspirations for the preservation and exhibition of objects within the emerging museums grew partly from this desire for moral authority and universal

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[45] Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England, Advertising and Spectacle 1851-1914* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p.29.
[46] *Punch*, 21 (July 1851), p.9.
[47] *Chambers Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, 335 (2 June 1860), p.342.

order. Richard Owen, in his manifesto for a national museum of natural history, pointed out in 1862 that the development of more museums could effectively counter revolution, while the South Kensington Museum went a step further by inaugurating a series of art schools and museums throughout India to reinforce the messages and methods of empire.[48] Museums offered, as Tony Bennett has discussed, a way for the middle classes to counter the spectre of leisured ruffians plotting political upheaval or criminal activity.[49] On the opening of Nottingham Museum in 1872, an article on 'Provincial Museums of Science and Art' in *The Builder* emphasised the regulatory role these new regional centres could play:

> [we] hope that it will be a salutary lesson to other towns...to realise an important addition to the educational and refining influences of their respective localities, by the means of which those who labour may be lifted upward, and at least deprived of their present excuse for merely sensual enjoyments, by having brought within their reach places of public resort, which, whilst competing with the gin-palace and drinking-saloon shall give them the means of social intercourse, in which elevation, not degradation, shall result.[50]

In order for objects to offer inspiration for elevated 'social intercourse', and to act as a refining influence, however, public ways of seeing had to be renegotiated. It was no longer enough to be dazzled by the glitz and glamour of spectacular displays. While objects were clearly still displayed to evoke a degree of wonder in the observer, this was to be tempered by judicious observation of the enlightening and enduring impact of carefully-chosen objects and their associated messages. Whereas the Great Exhibition, and the trade fairs which followed it, as Bennett discusses, aimed for the

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[48] See Richard Owen, *On the Extent and Aims of a National Museum of Natural History* (London: Saunders Otley, 1862).

[49] In *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), Bennett discusses a number of ways in which the early museums may be considered as instruments for maintaining middle-class order and inculcating approved middle-class values in the lower classes.

[50] *The Builder*, 22 June 1872. Cutting in the archive of the Nottingham Castle Museum, Press file.

'stupefaction' of the working classes 'before the rarefied products of their own labour', the museum experience attempted to encourage a more active visual and intellectual engagement beyond simple astonishment.[51]

The South Kensington museum was, Bennett asserts, at the forefront of this perceptual readjustment because it 'detached art and culture from the function of bedazzling the population and harnessed them, instead, to that of managing the population by providing it with the resources and contexts in which it might become self-educating and self-regulating'.[52] The effect Bennett identifies was not confined to the South Kensington Museum, nor to its London visitors. With its influential series of travelling exhibitions, and the increasingly extensive network of regional museums, the changing perception of objects inevitably also became established in regional centres. It was perhaps here, where manufacturing was the weft of the social fabric and where glitzy events like the Great Exhibition could be regarded as some distant 'other', that the public was most actively engaged with the 'self-educating and self-regulating' possibilities offered by displays of decorative things. In the serious context of making the self, the family and the town respectable, respected and prosperous, the emerging museums with their nascent displays of manufactured objects were embraced precisely because they offered further evidence of progress and additional means for personal and social change.

The municipal exhibitions of modern manufactures, moreover, exposed the middle classes to an authoritative local alternative to taste manuals and commercial stores for comparing the nature and presentation of the objects on display with the

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[51] Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex', in *Thinking about Exhibitions* ed. by B. W. Ferguson, R. Greenberg and S. Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.82-109.
[52] Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, p.40.

arrangement of their own homes. Alongside specimens elucidating complicated scientific precepts or priceless, and unobtainable, treasures from past civilizations, the displays of modern manufactures brought the museum in direct contact with the visitor's everyday life, and allowed a lively interchange between the public activity of museum visiting and the private spaces of the home. Situated at the heart of local activity, the museum was able to validate and inform individual choices of taste, enabling visitors better to locate themselves within their personal and social networks.

This elision of the distance between objects on display in museums and those people could readily see and buy, or aspire to buy, within their own personal circles, helped consolidate a perception that it was through and with things that lives could be identified, measured and displayed. In his discussion of the Great Exhibition, Thomas Richards notes that the event 'elevated things to the status of the ultimate reality' and it was this continuing sense of reality being located in the tangible evidence provided by objects which helps explain why museum visiting was so popular and why so many municipalities believed that, through the museum, they could create a better ordered and understandable space for themselves within the bewildering expanding world.[53] If, as Barbara Black claims in her examination of Victorian museums, the London museums were 'the symbolic space of nationalism [which] gave a culture a way to know its own boundaries', so the enthusiasm for creating regional museums can be read as a way of creating and asserting civic identity both alongside, and defined against, metropolitan influence, the 'symbolic space' in which the towns and cities across the UK, and their inhabitants, grew to

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[53] Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England*, p.64.

understand themselves.[54]

This interactive attitude to the viewing of objects relied in part on the increasingly sophisticated understanding of the act of seeing which began to emerge during the Victorian period. As several critics have explored, the better technical appreciation of the act of sight made possible through advances in optical science and improvements in instruments like microscopes and cameras, led in turn to a more sensitive appreciation of 'the slipperiness of the border between the visible and the invisible, and the questions which it throws up about subjectivity, perception and point of view'.[55] As the world became more and more visible, as things ever smaller and further away came within the range of (aided) sight, so the relationships between the empirical and the instinctive were newly conceptualised and the middle-class fascination with the object grew. Objects became increasingly valuable as a way of making links between the seen and unseen, and understanding both.

Becoming spectators of themselves, comparing themselves and their lifestyles to the things on view around them, the middle classes, not surprisingly, came to inhabit an increasingly commodified world, as objects became loaded with layers of meaning and were subject to the desires of the consumer. This evolution was particularly significant for the decorative or manufactured objects which were now appearing not only in people's parlours but also in museum collections. Unlike Old Master works of art or unique natural history specimens, determining what constituted a significant or meaningful piece of applied art, and whether such a piece

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[54] Black, *On Exhibit*, pp.105-6.

[55] Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.2. For interesting discussions of the changing attitudes to vision, see also Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*; and Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

was therefore appropriate for museum display, was potentially problematic. Rarely 'authored' beyond, perhaps, the mark of a particular manufacturer, the way in which an individual object accrued value was frequently subject to more obscure processes than, for example, the simple lineage of provenance applied to an historic painting. Values were often subject to tricky subjective judgments of 'taste'. As people became more alert to the untrustworthiness of subjectivity, and increasingly driven by consumer angst, the display of modern manufactures within the museum potentially confirmed and sanctioned personal choices. Such a process was not, however, without its dangers: for the new museums too, the slipperiness of applied values and individual judgments could also, as Malcolm Baker discusses in his history of the Victoria and Albert Museum, 'alert the visitor to the artificiality, subjectivity, and seeming arbitrariness of the institutions in which they are placed'.[56]

In order to assert the assigned value of an object, and the authority of the museum displaying it, therefore, these 'lesser art' pieces were increasingly presented in a visual continuum which emphasised the narrative of design or manufacturing process. The careful display of objects, with labels which often revealed simply the date and material of manufacture, allowed meaning to be secured by the apparent visual and historical relationship between different pieces. The potentially subjective responses of the visitor could be suppressed by an objective, and educational, presentation. By presenting rows of near identical silver candlesticks, for example, or successive cases of tableware, the visitor was being asked less to view each individual piece as to consider the historical narrative of the whole. The potentially erratic meanings which an individual object might have conveyed if displayed alone

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[56] Malcolm Baker, 'Museums, Collections and their Histories', p. 21.

with a lengthy written text exploring the nuances of aesthetics, ownership and fashion, were thus obscured by an approved, more orderly interpretation. The unreliability of viewing could be contained by a curatorial account which asserted a complete, and truthful, way of looking at things.

For Barbara Black, this emphasis on revealing the story of an object through visual display aligns the Victorian museum with one of the period's most influential literary genres: 'Victorian museums depended on the assumptions of nineteenth-century literary realism, on the fidelity to circumstantial evidence and empirical data (seeing is believing) that makes a culture avow 'This is how it really happened'.[57] As Black discusses, there are significant correspondences between the construction of literary realities – many of which were dependent on careful and detailed descriptions of domestic interiors and their objects – and the mapping out of the world in the museum by the orderly presentation of things. The quest for an organising principle which, as Sally Shuttleworth identifies, drove novelists like George Eliot to attempt to find ways within their fiction to 'bind disparate parts and reveal unity beneath apparent chaos' was also a quest upon which museum displays ventured, as they tried to draw together a range of objects and present a coherent narrative of display.[58]

Yet what is overlooked in Black's argument, for both the realist novel and the museum, is the way in which these carefully-constructed visual narratives, despite the best efforts of the museum staff, were frequently subverted by the nature of the decorative objects themselves and the increasingly sophisticated understanding of the subjective role of the viewer. The primacy of vision only appeared to offer true and

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[57] Black, *On Exhibit*, p.58
[58] Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.146.

accurate information about the external world which, on examination, turned out to be more problematic and contentious than at first sight. Vision, as Jonathan Crary has suggested, was by the middle of the century becoming understood to be personal and unreliable, 'relocated in the subjectivity of the observer'.[59] In *Felix Holt*, for example, written in 1866 but set over 30 years earlier, Eliot gives a detailed introduction to the market town of Treby Magna and its inhabitants in which domestic, manufactured objects – which might in another context have formed part of a local museum collection – are an integral part of the description and act as indicators of the historical processes and social networks on display in the novel:

> ...in no country town of the same small size as Treby was there a larger proportion of families who had handsome sets of china without handles, hereditary punchbowls, and large silver ladles with a Queen Anne's guinea in the centre. Such people naturally took tea and supped together frequently...[60]

Yet the singular, even broken, and distinctly old-fashioned nature of the Treby objects, rather than asserting, as Black argues, that 'seeing is believing', suggest instead a more complex understanding of the nature of things on display in which the act of seeing is multi-layered, the beliefs it engenders uncertain and the meanings it elicits inherently shifting. So while the townspeople of Treby, with their 1830s outlook, believe their collection of objects displays the lineage and tradition in which they desire to be rooted, Eliot, with the benefit of a more modern understanding of the unstable nature of visual evidence, describes instead the ways in which the objects act as indicators for the changes happening around them. The visual prompts which the objects provide to the characters in the novel are very different to those

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[59] Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p.150.
[60] George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, ed. by Peter Coveney (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p.124. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

they suggest to the author and reader. As Eliot makes clear, the 'old-fashioned, grazing, brewing, wool-packing, cheese-loading life of Treby Magna' is under threat:

> First came the canal; next the coal-mines at Sproxton, two miles off the town; and thirdly, the discovery of a saline spring, which suggested to a too constructive brain the possibility of turning Treby Magna into a fashionable watering-place...the Spa, for some mysterious reason, did not succeed. Some attributed the failure to the coal-mines and the canal, others to the peace, which had had ruinous effects on the country...In this way it happened that Treby Magna gradually passed from being simply a respectable market-town – the heart of a great rural district, where the trade was only such as had close relations with the local landed interest – and took on the more complex life brought by mines and manufactures, which belong more directly to the great circulating system of the nation than to the local system to which they had been superadded...(124-5)

The 'simple, respectable' objects which once allowed the townspeople to define themselves within an understood social and historical context, appear instead now as futile reminders of a lost lifestyle. In Eliot's presentation of a changing town, the meanings displayed by the sets of china and pieces of silver are changing too. Once a sign of wealth and tradition, they have become now indicators of a society left behind and of relationships petrified through age and disuse. The punchbowls and Queen Anne ladles have become complicit in a complex, and ironic, narrative which suggests the shifting, uncertain nature of visual evidence.

The correspondences between museums and texts were not confined, however, to the connections between realist fiction and the objects on display within it. For many Victorians, the museum had existed as a textual construct before it had become known as a physical space. From the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the notion of museums as repositories of the curious and instructive, in whatever format, had led to the evolution of a series of magazines presenting themselves as 'museums' alongside, indeed often in advance of, the material development of buildings and display spaces. Aimed at the popular, largely female,

market, these magazines reinforced the impression of a museum not as a physical space but as a concept of learning and wonder, bringing together into one place a heterogeneous assortment of bits and pieces which acquired meaning by being presented collectively within a coherent structure dependent on literary arrangement. Among such magazines, the *Ladies' Monthly Museum,* published from 1798 until 1811, presented 'an assemblage of whatever can tend to please the fancy interest of the mind or exalt the character of the British fair', while the *Ladies' Museum,* running from 1773 to 1819, similarly offered:

> useful lessons for the conduct of the female life, favourite new songs, select pieces of poetry, country-dances, maxims and reflections for the conduct of female life, historical anecdotes in honour of the fair sex, useful receipts in cooking and confectionary etc.[61]

In addition there were less successful and long-running titles which included *The Wonderful Museum and Extraordinary Magazine* (1803); *The New Magazine of Choice Pieces or Literary Museum* (1810) and *The Literary Museum* (1828). What all the titles shared was a sense of miscellany and an understanding that commonplace things – songs, recipes, dances – could be arranged and classified alongside the novel and the extraordinary to create a whole interesting and significant enough to be labelled 'museum'.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, in a reflection of the increasingly exotic and unusual objects which were beginning to appear in physical museum displays, the museum magazine had evolved into a more eclectic, and less educational, enterprise which becomes a source of comedy in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Spending an evening with his new friend Wegg, the now wealthy Mr

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[61] Editorial, *Ladies' Museum* (December 1773), p.i.

Boffin is anxious to be read to from a volume 'hidden and forgot': 'Why the

bookseller that sold me the Wonderful Museum – where's the Wonderful Museum?'

He was on his knees on the floor in a moment, groping eagerly among the books.'[62]

Knowing it was the 'fourth wollume', and eager to prolong Boffin's suspense, Wegg

runs through the possible curiosities such a museum might have had to offer:

> 'Remarkable petrification, sir?...Memoirs of General John Reid, commonly
> called The Walking Rushlight, sir? With portrait...Remarkable case of a
> person who swallowed a crown-piece, sir?...Oh, this must be it. Singular
> discovery of a will, lost twenty-one years.' (417)

Although clearly for popular delectation rather than the exaltation of character,

Boffin's magazine, as much as the earlier examples, hints at the small step between

these literary constructs and the arrangement of objects in a visual context within

museum walls. Both call on the reader/visitor to wonder and learn at the 'remarkable'

and 'singular', presenting a series of textual or visual prompts which allow for

further discovery. Both bring together a dazzling variety of objects which, once

organised into a museum, become authorative, presenting the reader/viewer with a

convincing narrative or series of narratives.

The public appetite for magazines such as Mr Boffin's 'Wonderful

Museum', was a symptom of a growing sense that identity could be created and

exhibited as the sum of one's reading and knowledge; that the self was a direct result

of the amount of culture consumed. With this realisation, however, came a zealous

concern with the type of material people were using: if a person was the sum of her

knowledge and reading, then it was important that she read and knew the correct

things. Dickens's implied mockery of the 'museum' periodical in *Our Mutual Friend*

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[62] Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* ed. by Michael Cotsell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.416-7. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

reflects a more widespread scorn of the increasing number of magazines, pamphlets and serialised books which presented a ragbag of bits and pieces of popular wisdom, hearsay and trivia to a mass readership. Poor-quality serialised fiction, too, for which there was a booming market, attracted criticism from those who considered it damaging to the impressionable readers (often women) who consumed it: 'Novels, romances and infidel publications are eagerly purchased,' explained a contributor to *Literature for the Working Man*, launched by temperance reformer John Cassell in 1850 to try to raise the standards of popular reading. 'Such trash is morally poisonous to the community, producing immorality, crime, and death'.[63]

This disquiet with the quality of what the public at large was reading was a clear indication of a common recognition that such material could be powerfully influential. Many popular publishers were active in radical, even revolutionary, politics: George W. M. Reynolds, for example, published a best-selling *Miscellany* between 1846 and 1869 which fused popular literature with a politics which espoused the causes of the Chartists. Given the potential influence of such publications, there had been a growing concern that the public's reading should be directed, if not monitored. The *Prospectus* for the launch of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in 1829 had suggested that there were plenty of readers in need of expert guidance. It had vowed to offer an alternative to the radical press and to '[impart] useful information to all classes of the community, particularly to such as are unable to avail themselves of experienced teachers'.[64] Producing a

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[63] *Literature for the Working Man,* 1 (December 1850), p.15. For a further discussion of the evolution of popular literature and its links to radical politics see Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics and the People, 1790-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[64] *Prospectus* (London: SDUK, 1829), p.2.

series of erudite and heavyweight treatises and journals such as *Library of Useful Knowledge*, *Working Man's Companion* and *Quarterly Journal of Education*, the SDUK had attempted to provide the type of information that would create knowledgeable and cultured citizens. In the decade after its launch it had proved enormously influential, providing an outlet for a variety of authors and offering aspiring individuals a route to personal improvement and social progression through personal study. Offering a central rallying point for what its own *Penny Magazine* termed 'the age of the intellect', the SDUK had, during the early decades of the century, posited texts as the pre-eminent way of diffusing knowledge and reading as the best way of consuming it.

By 1842, however, membership of the SDUK had fallen to just 49 subscribers and its active life finished four years later. The public was turning elsewhere for its learning and entertainment. To some extent this was simply a change in the nature of books being digested: as Dickens noted in *Hard Times* (1854), 'they took Defoe to their bosoms instead of Euclid, and seemed to be on the whole more comforted by Goldsmith than Cocker'.[65] It was also, however, an indication that opportunities for public instruction and diversion were becoming increasingly widespread and varied. While the middle classes in particular continued, of course, to read, they also adopted the emerging museums as respectable suppliers of the knowledge they coveted. A museum visit could act in the same way as a novel or journal reading to consolidate one's social and intellectual position by facilitating the acquisition and display of new and fashionable information. It was a role which was to locate the museum

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[65] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. by Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.88. Dickens's own journal, *Household Words*, was, from 1850, just one of the populist publications which provided the kind of reading which was keeping the public entertained.

firmly at the heart of personal desire and social mobility. Museums, unlike some of the more sensational publications, were apparently presenting authoritative, visual and textual fact and offering visitors the chance to accumulate a cultural knowledge which was both individually improving and socially advantageous.

So influential was the sense that museums were good for you, that the knowledge they imparted would create a more polished and acceptable identity, and that the authority they generated could control anti-social behaviour, that a fictional visit to a museum became easily understood by readers to have a salutary effect. In *Armadale* (1864-1866), the plot's denouement is partly dependent on Collins presenting extracts from Lydia Gwilt's diary, which recounts how Lydia, in 'a frenzy of rage' with Midwinter, sends for a carriage and 'told the man to take me where he liked'. The cabby's choice is the Museum, not from any particular motive but rather as a last resort for those who have nowhere better to go: 'He took me,' recounts Lydia, 'as he took all strangers, to the Museum'.[66] Once in the galleries, Lydia's rage, which throughout the novel has acted as an indication of her potential for violent, unpredictable and distinctly unfeminine behaviour, quickly dissipates and is neutralised by the influence of the museum: 'I flounced from room to room, with my face in a flame, and the people staring at me. I came to myself again, I don't know how. I returned to the carriage...' (696). The imagery is of identity recovered – 'I came to myself again' – and of desirable natural order restored. Despite the fact that Lydia seems to have no conscious awareness of the objects about her – only of the shocking effect she is having on fellow visitors – the influence of the museum

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[66] Wilkie Collins, *Armadale* ed. by Catherine Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.696. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

environment on her behaviour is rapid, and long-lasting. When she returns home after the visit, the threat she earlier posed to domestic and social authority has been replaced by homely tranquillity: she is 'dreaming' over her tea as she looks out over the 'quiet sea'; she is 'composed enough by this time' to take account of Midwinter's habits, 'too prudent to disturb him again' (696).

With fictional encounters such as this, as well as the constant promptings of the popular press, it was, then, little surprise that municipal authorities enthusiastically embraced the expanding museum network, and that the display of modern, household things – the decorative arts – became embedded within the museum canon. The growing influence of local displays of manufactured things and the increasing number of people who, as homemakers, consumers and professionals, began to place values on objects and delight in showing them, was not only an indication of changes in the way people were spending their money and time, but, more fundamentally, in the way they came to see and identify themselves, as individuals and as communities. The narratives offered by objects on display in fictional texts or museum cases threaded their way through the lives of ordinary people, offering them changing ways of perceiving the world about them. 'The most important progress which the English workman can make just now,' proclaimed *Art, Pictorial and Industrial* in 1872, 'is in feeling for, and perception of, the...union of the useful with the beautiful'. Such sensitivity would not only, it asserted, allow the individual to progress, but would have wider social implications, creating 'good servants of our country and of our race'. With their displays of decorative objects, the useful and the beautiful, the emerging museums sought to be at the heart of this revolution in perception. Presenting themselves as good servants of the municipality

and the country, they offered new ways of looking at things and, with them, the self.

2. Objects for Posterity:
Personal Meanings and Public Museums.

> *...the blank that follows death – the weary void – the sense of desolation that will come upon the strongest minds, when something familiar and beloved is missing at every turn – the connexion between inanimate and senseless things, and the object of recollection, when every household god becomes a monument...[1]*

At the end of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), the desolation and upheaval of mourning, 'the blank that follows death,' is brought sharpest home, Dickens suggests, by the familiar reminders provided by 'inanimate and senseless things'. Through their connection to the dead, ordinary objects become sanctified repositories of memory; the past is remembered through commonplace domestic things. The value of objects inherited from, or connected to, the dead is dependent not on any financial worth they might have accrued through antique status, but rather on sentimental associations which locate acute personal meanings in the 'monuments' these objects provide.

The nostalgic turn of the Victorian psyche is well-documented. As Philippa Levine notes, the adulation of a progressive and successful age of empire was paradoxically accompanied in many mid-nineteenth-century minds with a simultaneous reverence for history and an urge to preserve ideals, traditions and objects of the past:

> The simultaneity of the threat posed by new and relative conceptions of time and of the confidence afforded England by expansive reference to the past and to progress suggests the central role which history played in the Victorian consciousness.[2]

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[1] Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop,* ed. by Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p.545.

[2] Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in*

While the taste for historical painting pointed to a longing for an idealised and stable past, a whole architectural genre, the 'antiquarian' style, became particularly fashionable during the 1850s and 1860s as the popularity of Rococo declined. The antiquarian look brought together artefacts from a variety of historical styles and periods to create rich interiors full of everything from Greek sculpture to medieval tapestry and Elizabethan furniture, and even in some cases to construct whole buildings from a mixture of historical fashions and techniques. Sir Walter Scott's carefully, if eclectically, designed home, Abbotsford, which was created between 1812 and 1832, was one of the most famous examples of the fashion, but wealthy socialites like Edward Bulwer Lytton were also making their antiquarian tastes public through the decoration of their homes. Similarly, at a time when developments in science and technology were challenging long-held views on everything from the nature of humankind to the time taken to travel from London to Scotland, the popularity of many early and mid-nineteenth-century writers was founded on their skill for tapping into a recognisable, if unreal, shared history. Walter Scott's tales of historicized rural adventure and Tennyson's *Idylls* of a lost medieval age, for example, implanted firmly in the Victorian mind the ideal of a fictionalised past. In addition, the burgeoning market for mementoes and souvenirs of both public events and personal epiphanies – from royal occasions to seaside excursions – suggests that people were eager to remember significant experiences and to prompt, and display, those memories through the acquisition of special things.

Victorian England 1838-1886 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.5.

This increasingly close relationship between a nostalgia for the past, and the desire for objects, had become evident from around the 1770s onwards, when it also began to be identified as a distinctly English trait. Between 1770 and 1830, the general affluence of the English gentleman, the opportunities for travel abroad, the decline of the European aristocracy and the resulting sale of treasures at comparatively low prices, meant that English sale rooms flourished, and the narratives of middle- and upper-class lives were increasingly being renegotiated and re-presented through their display of things. In 1835, Gustav Waagen, later Director of the picture gallery in Berlin and adviser to the 1850 British Parliamentary Select Commission on the National Gallery, commented that 'the English were unrivalled collectors of works of art...almost unique in their love of surrounding themselves with objects of beauty from many previous ages'.[3] By the middle of the century, opportunities for acquiring 'objects of beauty' had greatly expanded and, with one foot in the nineteenth-century reality of urban industrialisation, many Victorians were using these objects to keep another rooted in a nostalgic myth of a former English glory. Those not lucky enough to acquire the right objects through legitimate inheritance, spent increasing levels of money and energy acquiring them from the growing network of shops and dealers in England and abroad.

With the advance of the nineteenth century, the desire for anchoring the self in things became increasingly evident. As Susan Stewart has explored in her examination of the impulses of collecting, the act of surrounding oneself with objects made familiar through use or simply through ownership, elides the gap between the

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[3] Gustav Waagen, *Works of Art and Artists in England* (1835), qtd. in Frank Hermann, *The English as Collectors. A Documentary Chrestomathy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), p.4.

unstable present and the more understandable past. The relationship between a person and his things – which may be inherited from family or part of a reassuring continuum of design – creates an illusion of timelessness, an idealised cycle, which links the current life with the ahistorical, and stable, lives of the objects. It creates 'a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism... all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection's world'.[4] By daily contact with 'ancient' objects acquired from antique dealers, or on display in the emerging museums, or simply by creating a personal universe of familiar inanimate things with private and family histories, the mid-Victorians were simultaneously attempting to allay their anxieties about their own position in a changing world.

In fiction too, this ambivalence towards the present meant that many contemporary concerns were being mediated through the creation of a recalled, more stable, past. The mid-Victorian, middle-class preoccupation with things was re-located to a fictional, rural past, where the apparently more simple lives of farmers, agricultural labourers and small provincial towns were recalled through an act of collective idealised memory which attempted to satisfy desires for stability and recognisable organic structure. While in reality it was the newly rich and the declining gentry who were attempting to consolidate their status through acts of nostalgic collecting, fiction often preferred to refract these concerns by drawing upon the sentimental attachment between the lower classes and their things. It was in the more simple, rural working communities of an earlier epoch, which could trace continuities of family and landscape, that objects came to represent monuments

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[4] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p.151.

against change. So in *Adam Bede*, published by George Eliot in 1859 but recalling 'far-reaching visions of the past...in the year of our Lord 1799', the simple villagers of Hayslope have few household objects, but those which they do have are invested with significant personal meanings.[5] When Adam tells his mother, for example, that Hetty has agreed 'they should all live together' after their marriage, Lisbeth's relief at the preservation of her intact family unit is articulated in a concern for the completeness of her simple collection of things: 'An' then, we needna part th' platters an' things, as ha' stood on the shelf together sin' afore thee wast born' (408). It is not the nature or value of the objects which is important, but their longevity, the permanent link they create with an apparently more settled time 'afore thee wast born'. In Eliot's attempt to anchor the present and understand it through reference to the past, this sentimental attachment to simple domestic objects is a recurring motif for the novel: Mrs Poyser's farm crockery, for example, acquires value because it has been 'I' the house this ten year' (272), kept 'all these 'ears as I bought at my own wedding' (273).

In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot further evokes a remembered rural community to explore the connections between objects, memory and a nostalgia for the past. The narrative begins as a personal memory recalled in the dreamy nostalgia of a doze: 'I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge'.[6] Dream-like states and the unpredictable demands of the individual's unconscious continue to pervade the novel, but are challenged by the characters' attempts to

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[5] George Eliot, *Adam Bede,* ed. by Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p.49. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.
[6] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss,* ed. by Gordon S. Haight with an introduction by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.7. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

establish a social duty bound to historical continuity and demonstrated through the tangible links to the past provided by objects. Set in an undefined historical time 'many years ago', the novel presents the St Ogg's community – and the Dodson family in particular – as preoccupied with mitigating the precarious present, and the disturbing individualism of the Tulliver blood, by retaining material connections with a more stable history. Domestic things act to confirm wealth and social standing against the uncertainties of business transactions and even death, for, as Foucault has suggested, the exchange of wealth and the objects it buys, appears to offer, if perhaps momentarily, a solution to the distress of the human condition:

> If there is an order regulating the forms of wealth...it is not because men have compatible desires; it is not because they experience the same hunger in their bodies or because their hearts are all swayed by the same passions; it is because they are all subjected to time, to toil, to weariness, and, in the last resort, to death itself.[7]

Deeply embedded in *The Mill on the Floss* is the importance of legacy, and the notion that the passing on of objects between family generations corresponds to a bequeathing of moral and social respectability. While the weighty historical structures of family business form a backdrop to the novel - most clearly evident in the absence of legacy brought about by Mr Tulliver's commercial failure - the focus is on the smaller, often domestic, objects of the women which are associated with personal memory and inheritance. For the Dodsons, the revelations of a person's real worth which come with death will be subject to a shrewd estimation of the things they leave behind. So, 'when Mrs Glegg died, it would be found that she had better lace laid by in the right-hand drawer of her wardrobe...than ever Mrs Wooll of St

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[7] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p.225.

Ogg's had bought in her life, although Mrs Wooll wore her lace before it was paid for' (53). Similarly, Mr Pullet keeps all his wife's medicine bottles which 'fill two o'the long storeroom shelves a'ready' because 'he says it's nothing but right folks should see'em when I'm gone' (95). Faced with financial ruin by her husband's reckless loans and law-suits, Mrs Tulliver is more concerned by the implications of the sale of their things with regards to her ability to leave heirlooms – and the disgrace this represents – than the more immediate worries of poverty: '"You'll never have one of 'em, my boy," she said, looking up at Tom with her eyes full of tears, "and I meant 'em for you. I wanted you to have all of this pattern"' (203).

Alongside this awareness of objects as a tangible link between generations, Eliot also explores the ways in which they provide keystones to memory, acting to shape remembered personal stories which in turn mould the characters' sense of self. At moments when economic and personal upheaval threaten the promise of a coherent continuum linking the present to the past, and the unified self which this would create, a focus on objects makes visible the conflicts which had been previously largely implicit. Thus, Mrs Tulliver's loss of things becomes bound to a sense of personal fragility which extends beyond material discomfort:

> Mrs Tulliver was seated there with all her laid-up treasures. One of the linen-chests was open: the silver teapot was unwrapped from its many folds of paper, and the best china was laid out on the top of the closed linen-chest; spoons and skewers and ladles were spread in rows on the shelves; the poor woman was shaking her head and weeping, with a bitter tension of the mouth, over the mark, "Elizabeth Dodson," on the corner of some of the tablecloths she held in her lap. (202)

Mrs Tulliver cries over the downfall of her old self, represented in the maiden name marked onto her cloth, and the continuity of identity which will be lost with the dispersal of her things. It is a loss which sees the final obliteration of a youthful past

woven into the memories which each object prompts:

> 'To think o' these cloths as I spun myself... and Job Haxey wove 'em, and brought the piece home on his back, as I remember standing at the door and seeing him come, before as I ever thought o' marrying your father!' (203)

This sudden visibility of objects within a novel in moments of stress, their ability to give shape to the tensions which had been latent in the narrative, continued to recur in fiction. For the individual character, threatened and undermined by external pressures, a focus on a single, simple object helps to extract them from the encroaching confusion. So in *Middlemarch* (1871-2), Rosamond's inability to engage with the increasing insecurities of her financial and social position manifests itself in her particular fascination with a household vase:

> 'I am obliged to tell you what will hurt you, Rosy. But there are things which husband and wife must think of together. I daresay it has occurred to you already that I am short of money.'
> Lydgate paused; but Rosamond turned her neck and looked at a vase on the mantelpiece.[8]

As her problems continue to mount and Lydgate finally explains to his wife that 'we shall have our furniture sold', Rosamond rejects potentially distressing intimacy in favour of a focus on her now-threatened things:

> Tears rolled silently down Rosamond's cheeks; she just pressed her handkerchief against them, and stood looking at the large vase on the mantelpiece. It was a moment of more intense bitterness than she had ever felt before. (683)

Threatened with loss, it is to her things, like Mrs Tulliver, that Rosamond turns. Her preoccupation with her objects allows her to locate herself physically in a reassuringly complete domestic world, and to avoid difficult conversations.

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[8] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.612. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

The desire to repress personal doubts and fears of encroaching loss by identifying with the inanimate is evident again in George Meredith's *The Egoist* (1879). Having finally run away from her proposed marriage to Willoughby, Clara Middleton is threatened with a loss of reputation and social acceptability as well as fortune and status. Sheltering in a room at a wayside inn, she, like Rosamond, chooses to concentrate her energies on the things, rather than the people, around her. She becomes fascinated by a 'silly spoon' in an empty glass:

> She had an impulse to pocket the spoon for a memento, to show it to grandchildren for a warning...'Here, my dears, is a spoon you should be ashamed to use in your teacups, yet it was of more value to me at one period in my life than silver and gold in pointing out, etc': the conclusion was hazy.[9]

When her personal life is at its most confusing and the dangers of the outside world most clearly before her, Clara invests her hopes for the future (grandchildren to whom she can impart moral lessons) in ordinary things. More significantly, the fear and disgrace she half-glimpses, but does not fully comprehend, are kept at bay by the objects, which act as 'witnesses,' so that Clara can transpose her own feelings onto the things around her: 'the smell of the glass was odious; it disgraced her' (335).

As Rosamond Lydgate's singular attachment to her 'large vase' demonstrates, objects did not necessarily have to be old to fulfil a reassuring role. Few consumers restricted their buying to the antique: most also had a taste for new things. While many of these objects nodded to the past through elements of design, for example, they equally celebrated new manufacturing techniques or fashions. The 1851 Great Exhibition, and the international shows which followed it, attempted to impress

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[9] George Meredith, *The Egoist*, ed. by George Woodcock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.335. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

consumers with the innovative and the novel. As Thomas Richards has pointed out, the Great Exhibition 'both commemorated the past and annihilated it' through a display which, unlike museums, presented everything as uniformly contemporary: labels rarely gave historical information and it was often difficult to discover the origins of the objects before their display in the Crystal Palace.[10] But while these new objects soon acquired and displayed personal meanings, it was objects with history which most clearly came to represent personal stories. As Mrs Tulliver weeps most over the loss of those things with the longest associations, so many mid-Victorian consumers, even with one eye on the latest fashions, constructed their sense of self from the fragments of their own, and other people's, pasts deposited in their objects.

This desire to construct and affirm a personal history made the objects of childhood increasingly important. While Eliot is critical of Mrs Tulliver's adult attachment to objects over and above the living members of her family in *The Mill on the Floss,* her exploration of the influence of youthful memories on the development of a mature identity, recognises the importance of apparently simple objects during the transitional phases of childhood. When Tom returns home for the first time since leaving Dorlcote Mill for school, she discusses the ways in which 'very commonplace, even ugly' things may become distinguished by their connection with the childhood home:

> There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labour of choice, and where the outer world seemed only an extension of our personality. (151)

Tracing the adult self to the 'deep, immovable roots' of memory which are grounded

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[10] Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England,* p.61.

in the objects of childhood, Eliot taps into the mid-Victorian fear that swift social and technological advances in the uncontrollable 'outer world' will disrupt this easy inherited security, and so disrupt identity. Childhood, a remembered state, is protected from disruption by being completed, safely tucked away in the past. For Eliot, objects are more than just relics to inspire moments of nostalgia: they offer a direct link to the better, purer self of the child. Just as the novel recreates a pre-industrial past which draws on an idealised collective memory, so the homely object roots the mid-Victorian reader in the secure past of a remembered childhood. In particular, objects offer a buffer against the changing priorities of contemporary living: 'Is not the striving after something better and better in our surroundings the grand characteristic which distinguishes man from the brute?' inquires Eliot, before emphasising the need for fixing this ambition to 'old inferior things' and the sound values of affection and family they represent:

> But heaven knows where that striving might lead us, if our affections had not the trick of twining round those old inferior things — if the loves and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory. (152)

Yet the narrative of *The Mill on the Floss* suggests that this simple connection between 'our affections' and the 'deep immovable roots of memory' is not as easily maintained as Eliot here suggests. The straightforward continuity she invokes is undermined by episodes which see the sense of self disrupted by a change in material objects, where a visible disturbance to childhood things undercuts the assurance of a simple, unified identity. As Sally Shuttleworth has discussed in her examination of *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science,* the promise of an individual identity in a 'true state of harmony between the inner and the outer realms' can only exist 'in

childhood, or in a society without change'.[11] And as the novel shows, society without change is impossible and even in childhood, stasis is, Eliot suggests, illusory. Mrs Tulliver has to surrender her table linen and with it her younger, more hopeful self and when Maggie's favourite books are sold at auction, she articulates a fearfulness for the future and a disruption of self which suggests far-reaching implications:

> 'O dear!', Maggie went on, half sobbing as she turned over the few books. 'I thought we should never part with that while we lived – everything is going away from us – the end of our lives will have nothing in it like the beginning!' (239)

Moreover, the reassuring structures of inheritance prove equally illusory, and the objects linked to the 'deep immovable roots in memory' were, as Mrs Tulliver discovers, increasingly finding their way out of cupboards and strongrooms and into auction houses. While Mrs Glegg and Mrs Pullet are insuring themselves against being forgotten through the accumulation of idiosyncratic collections, there is, of course, no guarantee that future generations will read the same narratives from the objects, or value them at all. Family inheritance, always a vexed issue, was, by the 1860s and 1870s a further illustration of personal uncertainty. As Thackeray pointed out, 'you who have little or no patrimony to bequeath or to inherit, may be on good terms with your father or your son...[but] the fathers and elder sons of all great families hate each other'.[12] In Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871-3), no end of legal documentation could definitively guard against personal interactions. Not only can a defiant widow be 'allowed to filch' the family jewels, but perhaps more worryingly, this is seen as part of a general tendency of widows to whittle away at

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[11] Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.77.

[12] William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, ed. by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.454. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

just inheritances: 'And she is to be allowed to filch it. As other widows filch china cups, and a silver teaspoon or two! It's quite a common thing, but I never heard of such a haul as this.'[13]

Nor is the object's role as a permanent representative of family threatened only by individuals – the whole confusion over what does and what does not legally constitute an heirloom suggests an instability at the very heart of the structure which should be preserving objects for posterity:

> 'They are family diamonds, Eustace diamonds, heirlooms – old property belonging to the Eustaces, just like their estates. Sir Florian didn't give 'em away, and couldn't, and wouldn't if he could. Such things ain't given away in that fashion. It's all nonsense. And you must give them up.'
> 'Who says so?' (52)

The financial and personal assurance which objects appear to offer within the tradition of legacy is seen to be under threat. While the objects themselves continue in existence regardless of the fate of their owner, the personal stories and meanings attached to them become lost or changed. Objects are no longer seen to have an intrinsic value which can be passed on at death, but rather a value which is subject to personal interpretation. 'Heirlooms,' asserts Mr. Dove in *The Eustace Diamonds* are:

> not that the future owners of them may be assured of so much wealth, whatever the value of the things so settled may be, - but that the son or grandson or descendent may enjoy the satisfaction that is derived from saying, my father or my grandfather or my ancestor sat in that chair...
> (258-9)

Similarly, in his description of the auction of the 'library, furniture, plate, wardrobe, and choice cellar of wines' of a deceased peer, Thackeray, in *Vanity Fair* (1847-8), emphasises this fleet change of status. Objects which had been regarded as robust

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[13] Anthony Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds,* ed. by W. J. McCormack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.40. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

tokens of long-term private significances have been reduced and decontextualised by public scrutiny: 'who would ever have thought, as we sat round the broad table sparkling with plate and spotless linen, to have seen such a dish at the head of it as that roaring auctioneer?' (160).

Even substantial collections, more thoughtfully and carefully accumulated than simple household furnishings, were subject to the same kind of disrespectful treatment. In his study of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century collectors, Clive Wainwright found that the collection of the 'gentleman connoisseur' was rarely regarded as a long-term family investment, and was, more usually, considered the result of a personal foible to be disregarded or sold off by his heirs:

> His brain alone stored the invisible yet vital cross-references that linked one object or group of objects with another...what to him was a supremely logical assemblage of objects seemed to the next generation a chaotic jumble of curiosities.[14]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, although the middle classes had frequently joined the 'gentleman connoisseur' to become part of this process of collecting, they had made the long-term future of the objects less, rather than more, stable. In the increasingly fluid economic environment created by the middle-class preoccupation with entrepreneurial trade, the meanings attached to objects rarely lasted a single lifetime, let alone being firmly attached through long generations. Things, as evidenced by Mrs Tulliver and Rosamond Lydgate, tended to prove more precariously rooted than they appeared, and, as late as 1900/1901, only 17% of the population was leaving enough property and possessions to be included in probate

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[14] Clive Wainwright, *The Romantic Interior: The British Collector at Home 1750-1850* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p.8.

records.[15] Collections were as much a site of family conflict as long-term security - a lifetime's accumulation could be dispersed in a tap of the auctioneer's hammer. The reassurance offered by objects was increasingly slippery and elusive.

Adding to this growing difficulty in pinning down residual, permanent meanings in personal objects, was the increasing visibility of things from other parts of the country, unfamiliar societies and different cultures. The growing ease and affordability of travel, and the commercial and personal comings-and-goings of expanding Empire, meant that objects were steadily bringing evidence of a new, unknown, and potentially unsettling world into the closed habits of English life. In *Novels Behind Glass*, Andrew Miller explores the intimate relationship between the development of the Great Exhibition and of the railways, emphasising the apparent collapse of time and space which took place both in the displays and in people's new relationship to travel. Just as the Great Exhibition distorted the relationship between past and present by creating a display space without history, he argues, so the advancements in travel, particularly the development of the railways, rearranged the mid-Victorian understanding of time and distance. Miller traces some contemporary responses to the opening of the Exhibition on 3rd May 1851, when many newspapers and journals reported not only the content of the Crystal Palace, but the new travel habits of the visitors and the transport infrastructure which allowed for the display of objects from across the world: *Household Words* celebrated the 'new ideas of time and space [given] to the civilized world'; *The Illustrated London News* described the 'practical annihilation of space and time which we owe to the railway system', and

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[15] For further discussion of the evidence from probate see, for example, Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (London: Batsford, 1988).

the *Athenaeum* summed up the reduction of place and time as 'the whole world concentrated in a mere point in space'.[16]

As the Great Exhibition had shown, objects were to play an increasingly significant role in this renegotiation of public perceptions of how the world was organised. Things from far-flung places or with exotic histories were beginning to turn up in ordinary homes; the 'practical annihilation of space and time' was bringing evidence of foreign lives into the everyday existence of the British public. While those privileged enough to complete their education with a European Grand Tour had long been ransacking historical sites for objects to take home, by the mid-nineteenth century, travel - and the objects acquired through travel - were becoming more widely accessible. Like Mr Meagles in *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), the middle classes were newly empowered to create their own house-museums from the pasts of other cultures. 'Five-and-thirty years ago,' Meagles would 'no more have thought about gadding about than I now think of – staying at home', and his new-found adventurousness inevitably results in the acquisition of a collection of things to commemorate his trips. Meagle's 'spoils', on open display, represent a 'vast miscellany' which only acquires meaning in relation to the family's travel itinerary. They include,

> ...antiquities from Central Italy, made by the best modern houses in that department of industry; bits of mummy from Egypt (and perhaps Birmingham); model gondolas from Venice; model villages from Switzerland; morsels of tesselated pavement from Herculaneum and Pompeii...Roman cameos, Geneva jewellery, Arab lanterns, rosaries blest all round by the pope himself, and an infinite variety of lumber. (236-7)

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[16] qtd. Miller, *Novels Behind Glass*, pp.54-5. Miller himself describes the Great Exhibition in similar terms as 'a depthless, abstract space' (53).

Side by side with pieces from genuine historical sites like Herculaneum, are objects of dubious provenance, modern copies, tourist souvenirs and worthless 'lumber'. Like the Great Exhibition, time and place are suspended in the unique, self-contained world presented by the Meagles's collection, which brings together the ancient and the modern, the exotic and the mundane. Despite the differences in actual value and significance, the objects are displayed without hierarchy in the family cottage, because each is equally meaningful in the presentation of the Meagles's family history; each fragment is a link to a personal as well as an historical past, and it is only in the reading of all the objects that a complete reading of the personal story of the owner can also be achieved.

The relationship between travel, the acquisition of things and the telling of personal narratives which is seen in Meagles's eclectic assortment was also at the heart of many private and public collections of objects. Satirising the sale of the vast collection of Ralph Bernal in 1855, it was the dubious personal and historical meanings ascribed to otherwise worthless objects which amused *Punch:*

> Lot 55. A salt-cellar, long used at a tavern near the Thames, where the Duke of Wellington once stood up out of a shower of rain, 5s 9d...Lot 57. One of the watering-pots used on the day of the opening of London Bridge - slightly leaky, nozzle wanting, 1s.[17]

In museums, too, there was an increasing tendency for donors to give objects which could be linked to human-interest stories. While many museum displays were rooted in the natural history collections of local gentlemen, by the 1860s and '70s there was an increasing amount of material from other countries and cultures (what would often now be termed ethnographic material) being given for display in municipal museums.

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[17] 'Aaron's Collection', *Punch,* 21 (June 1855), p.143.

In her survey of public museums, for example, Kate Hill suggests that the proportion of objects in the early displays at Preston, Leicester and Liverpool which came from Britain was less than half, with the rest being made up of things from more exotic colonial locations such as New Zealand, India and West Africa.[18]

Although the British Museum had been showing these kinds of foreign objects since its inception, many local museums were less comfortable with them. The Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter opened in 1868, and before its first public visitors were admitted, local benefactors were donating a range of objects linked to travel expeditions abroad.[19] When pressures of space dictated that the amount of material on display should be edited, however, it was the travellers' objects which were transferred to a 'temporary depot', which, although open to the public, remained physically separate from the main museum until 1895.[20] In practice what existed was two museums – one about Exeter and its environment (with an emphasis on its natural history), and one with a distinctly 'other' identity, grounded not in the locality but in the foreign and exotic. As the accessions register records, donors appeared to make little practical distinction between the two types of objects, often giving a small collection which included elements of both. On 18th May 1877, for example, a number of minor natural history donations are recorded, in the midst of which was also a donation from Sergeant John Ellis, of her Majesty's 55th regiment:

[a] twentyfive Rupee note apparently Burmese, with some allied character,

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[18] Kate Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums 1850-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p.75.

[19] The Museum opened simply as the 'Albert Memorial Museum' but was afforded royal status in 1889 when the Duke and Duchess of York (later King George and Queen Mary) opened a new wing.

[20] G.T.Donisthorpe, *An Account of the Origin and Progress of the Devon and Exeter Albert Memorial Museum* (Exeter: Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, 1868), p.24.

printed on native paper, taken from the body of a Rebel Sepoy shot by the donor at the recapture of Dharwalagiri in the Nepaul mountains.[21]

What the divide suggested, however, was a philosophical hierarchy which distinguished between serious science collections and traditional picture galleries, which warranted prime public display, and the less easily-defined 'things', which transgressed boundaries between art and science, travel and home, use and decoration.

In the attempt to locate these elusive things within some kind of meaningful framework, what came to be emphasised, as in Mr Meagles's and Mrs Tulliver's displays, were the personal histories attached to the objects. As the record of Sergeant Ellis's twenty-five rupee note suggests, the private significance of the object was adopted into the more formal, public history being articulated by the museum. The fictional attempt to construct identity by piecing together fragments of various pasts was taken one step further by the museum which presented layers of these personal stories in an effort both to bolster and validate the identities of the museum donors and to negotiate a municipal selfhood for the new collections. While the objects themselves may have been, in some cases, little more than travellers' curiosities, what became 'of great significance' were 'the connections of some of their donors with important historical events'.[22]

In Exeter, it was an emphasis which the museum had inherited from the Devon and Exeter Institution, its predecessor in the city since 1813, which had attracted a number of significant donations but which 'soon ceased to command

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[21] Archive of The Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. Unpublished notes on accessions history.
[22] *History and Description of the Collections: An Academic Handbook* (Exeter: Exeter City Council, 1997), p.5.

attention and was allowed to slumber in quiet forgetfulness'.[23] In particular, the

Institution held items donated by Captain Francis G. Bond, collected during 1791-3

when he was First Lieutenant to his uncle Captain Bligh on his second Pacific

voyage, as well as objects associated with early nineteenth-century explorers in

search of the North West Passage, including a sledge 'brought back by Sir William

Parry in 1820 and presented to the Devon and Exeter Institution by Parry and Lt

Griffiths in 1821'.[24] It is worth noting, however, that the collection and display of

objects which contributed to a substantial, if sometimes local, cult of personality was

in no way confined to Exeter. Listed in the original 1825 catalogue for Sunderland

Museum, for example, were 'a pair of garters worn by the Queen of Tahiti' - the

spoils of one of Captain Cook's voyages - and 'Colonel Lilburne's boots', not in

themselves of any interest except as a relic of the short life of Colonel 'Free-born

John' Lilburn (1618-1657) who won fame for publishing political pamphlets and,

more flamboyantly, because he was:

> sentenced at the age of 19 to be whipped through the streets of London,
> pilloried and imprisoned for life; released; fought in the civil war on the
> side of Parliament; fell out with Cromwell; was exiled, and returned to
> live out his days as a Quaker.[25]

When the decision was taken in Exeter in 1862 to begin work on raising

funds and collections for a permanent museum, the number of donations of similarly

personal, often exotic, objects increased. On the Museum's opening in 1868, it was

given a collection of over 30 pieces collected during the Pacific voyages of Captain

Cook in the 1770s and acquired by a local man, Revd H. Vaughan, on the sale of

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[23] Donisthorpe, *An Account of the Origin and Progress of the Devon and Exeter Albert Memorial Museum*, p.6.
[24] ibid., p.5.
[25] Jessop and Sinclair, *Sunderland Museum: The People's Palace in the Park*, p.40.

London's Leverian Museum in 1806. The following year Mr W. Bower Scott donated a series of 40 objects from the same areas which had been collected by his uncle, a midshipman on the expedition of *The Discovery* captained by George Vancouver in 1790-95. By the late 1870s the museum had attracted donations of objects from travellers to China, Taiwan, Japan, New Zealand, Fiji, South-east Africa, Inuit homelands, India, West Africa and Turkey, as well as the Americas. In 1880, an important addition to the collection was made by the horticultural firm of J. Veitch and Sons: while collecting plant specimens, John Gould Veitch had also collected costume, ornaments, baskets and bowls from South America, Madagascar, Malaya, Melanesia, China and the Philippines.

While later professionals identified many of these donations as important and early examples of rarely-surviving objects, the emphasis during the 1870s and '80s was on making links with famous names and presenting visual evidence of their adventure, military success and contributions to Empire. The donor was rarely the actual traveller – more often the objects came through family and friends – but with the gift of objects for public display, the donor achieved association with both the reflected glory of the adventurer and the municipal distinction of the museum. Object labels recording the provenance of the donation allowed for a certain amount of self-advertisement within the museum displays, while the local press often ensured wider recognition. *The Exeter Flying Post*, for example, regularly recorded gifts to the municipal collection: the edition for April 6th 1870 noted a variety of recent donations:

> Dr Pennell has presented a fine series of Papal medals in silver and bronze, 177 in number...Captain H. D. Grant lately employed in superintending the diving operation for recovering the treasure on board *The Carnatic*, lost in the Indian Ocean, has sent some remarkable fish...Mrs

Charles Williams, a valuable tortoiseshell comb, of immense size, as worn by the ladies of Mexico; and Mrs Gordon, an old Scottish spinning wheel.[26]

The objects on display acted to chronicle and celebrate unrecorded family histories – loose associations with famous sea-captains; brief military honour; a fleeting intimacy with the exotic. They created what Martin Prösler terms 'social memories' of things which had never actually been seen, acting to simulate external reality and create a regulated representation of the real world.[27] As the Victorian taste for nostalgia was encouraging many people to piece together their own identities from the remnants of their past, so the validation afforded by the museum to the remnants of other, associated pasts helped strengthen and sanction those identities, while also lending them a tantalising sense of the foreign.

For the museum, drawing together these personal histories, the challenge was in arranging the displays to create some kind of coherent argument from the variety of donated objects. The first curator at Exeter, W. S. M. D'Urban, a natural historian, chose an arrangement which presented the objects as 'geographically and ethnologically sequent'.[28] As the term 'sequent' suggests, the intention was to illustrate a developmental argument that owed much to evolutionary ideas informing the study of natural history. Thus visitors to the museum were rewarded not only with a glimpse of the exotic, but with a reassuring visual discourse which placed their own race and culture higher up the evolutionary scale than those they were examining.[29]

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[26] *The Exeter Flying Post,* 6 April 1870. Handwritten notes and transcripts in the archives of the Royal Albert Museum, Exeter.

[27] Martin Prosler, 'Museums and Globalization', in *Theorizing Museums* ed. by Sharon MacDonald and Gordon Fyffe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.40.

[28] Annual Report (1886-7), p.4. Archives of The Royal Albert Memorial Museum.

[29] The debate about how best to display ethnographic material was a particularly lively one towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The collections at Exeter were reorganised in 1895, when they were finally removed from the 'depot' to a purpose-built wing of the

Exploring the enthusiasm for these foreign objects throughout the nineteenth century, Virginia Dominquez notes that they were not collected for their intrinsic value but,

> as metonyms for the people who produced them. And the people who produced them are the objects of examination not because of their intrinsic value but because of their personal contribution to our understanding of our own historical trajectory.[30]

Rather than being exhibited as unrelated fragments, the objects on display in the museum became integrated into a consistent narrative which reinforced both social and scientific theory, and, with that, the visitor's sense of self. Objects of a disturbing 'other' world were safely mediated through the collector/donor, the curator and the museum to decontextualise and dehumanise them. In particular, meanings attached in native contexts through use at religious or tribal ceremony were significantly reduced, or even ignored, in favour of an interpretation which focussed on meanings reinforcing the English colonial viewpoint of the middle and upper classes. The exotic was simultaneously brought closer through its display in the local museum and firmly distanced by the display's emphasis on manageable, non-threatening histories.

This ambivalence about the exotic in the midst of the middle classes was evident, too, in fiction which also presented a barely-concealed anxiety about the returned traveller and his objects. In *Middlemarch*, the enclosed 1830s town which Eliot creates proves suspicious of the outsider. The 'subtle movement' of 'old provincial society' which the novel records owes much to the disturbing intervention of the new-comer (121). Generations of fixed moral and social judgements are

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Museum, and again in 1925 when further emphasis was placed on the role of the objects in illustrating principles of human evolution.

[30] Virginia Dominguez, 'The Marketing of Heritage', *American Ethnologist*, 13.3 (1986), 546-555 (p.548).

threatened by the new, more flexible, ambitions and scientific theories of an outsider like Lydgate, for example, who, inexplicably, 'had come to Middlemarch bent on doing many things that were not directly fitted to make his fortune or even secure him a good income' (121). The rootless Raffles dips in and out of Middlemarch affairs without any apparent concern for longer-term consequences, while the structures of the provincial town are disrupted by 'Settlers' who 'came from distant counties, some with an alarming novelty of skill, others with an offensive advantage in cunning' (122).

Set in contrast to this encroaching and endangering novelty are more time-honoured structures of inheritance. The traveller brings new ideas and skills; the older families attempt to stem the tide of change by marking their place, historically and socially, through the inheritance of things. At the very opening of the novel the reader is reassured that 'If Dorothea married and had a son, that son would inherit Mr Brooke's estate, presumably worth three thousand a-year' (31). Many of the tensions which the narrative presents are apparently resolved by an ending which attempts to reinforce cyclical images of stability. The authoritative authorial voice reassures the reader that 'every limit is a beginning as well as an ending' and the conclusion of the novel re-asserts the comforting traditions of inheritance: 'Mr Brooke lived to a good old age, and his estate was inherited by Dorothea's son' (784). Yet, as we have already seen, the rules and habits of inheritance are not above disruption, and the security Eliot proposes is at best temporary. The uncertainty and disorder which are written into the length of the novel act to subvert the apparent guarantees of its conclusion.

Within these narrative tensions between new and established, or threatened

upheaval and restored order, objects act to give shape to reassuring notions of continuity. Individuality can be disturbingly fluid and unpredictable: Mr Brooke, we are told, 'will run into any mould but he won't keep shape' (95), and even the apparently unswerving Casaubon, on closer examination, 'floated among flexible conjectures' (520). In a climate emphasising the unpredictable human condition, the tangible evidence of things helps to bolster the 'few personages or families that stood with rock firmness amid all this fluctuation' (122). So when Dorothea first encounters Casaubon's home, she compares it positively against her family home at The Grange, precisely because it is rooted in tangible evidence of an English, rather than a foreign, past:

> ...the curious old maps and bird's-eye views on the wall of the corridor, with here and there an old vase below, had no oppression for her, and seemed more cheerful than the casts and pictures at the Grange, which her uncle had long ago brought from his travels...To poor Dorothea these severe classical nudities and smirking Renaissance-Correggiosities were painfully inexplicable, staring into the midst of her Puritanic conceptions: she had never been taught how she could bring them into any sort of relevance with her life. But the owners of Lowick apparently had not been travellers, and Mr Casaubon's studies of the past were not carried on by such means. (68)

The traveller's objects are linked to religious and moral insecurity; they make an uncomfortable challenge on the preconceptions of an English middle-class young woman. While the objects at Lowick are more-or-less meaningless, with little presence to distract Casaubon from his single-minded research, The Grange accommodates the 'severe' and the 'smirking' side by side, presenting a more engaging, eclectic, ahistorical approach to the past which it constructs through a combination of cultural influences. Both Casaubon and Mr Brooke travel – when Casaubon and Dorothea visit Rome on their honeymoon, Casaubon expresses a weary boredom with many of the 'tourist' sites Dorothea wishes to see – but only Mr

Brooke marks his connection to other places through the acquisition of things. Back in England, these things become quietly suggestive of the possibilities of the self and the family: Dorothea is disturbed by them because, as yet, she lacks the experience to 'bring them into any sort of relevance with her life'.

Similarly in Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), the challenge the worldly-wise Henry Knight presents to the enclosed world of Elfride and Stephen Smith is first suggested in a glimpse of his London rooms:

> Portions of the floor, and half the wall-space, were taken up by bookshelves ordinary and extraordinary; the remaining parts, together with brackets, side-tables, &c., being occupied by casts, statuettes, medallions, and plaques of various descriptions, picked up by the owner in his wanderings through France and Italy.[31]

Like Mr Brooke, Knight's travels are dismissed as 'wanderings' rather than study, and there is a sense of dangerous, almost random, habits and ideas having been 'picked up' abroad which, though latent now, remain evident in his disturbing mixture of objects. Ironically, it is Stephen who, during the course of the novel, is sent to work on a foreign project but, unlike Knight, he mixes uncomfortably with new lifestyles, and his failure is implicit in his ill-fated attempt to acquire some meaningful travellers' objects:

> One day I bought some small native idols to send home to you as curiosities, but afterwards finding they had been cast in England, made to look old, and shipped over, I threw them away in disgust. (186)

Whereas the Meagles family fails to recognise, or at least be disturbed by, objects of false provenance in their collection, Stephen Smith, the ambitious working man, is 'disgusted' by this attempt to defraud him of his proof of foreign adventure. The

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[31] Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* ed. by Tom Dolin and Alan Manford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.102. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

'curiosities' which he hoped would legitimise both his labour, and his love for Elfride, have become reduced by the market in worthless souvenirs, and there is something equally comic and disturbing in the far-reaching entrepreneurialism of Empire.

By the 1870s, when *A Pair of Blue Eyes* appeared, the market for 'exotic' goods, was witnessing a fashionable boom, with buyers clamouring for everything from hothouse blooms to tea; from Indian silks to Japanese furnishings. Stephen's experience suggests, however, that as well as providing desirable goods, profitable commerce and new fashions, the expanding Empire in particular, and burgeoning trade routes in general, offered the simultaneous, and unsettling, threat of deception, fraud and, ultimately, the break down of order. While Stephen's experience of life in India appears to be generally benign, the underlying fear of physical and moral degeneration which coloured many readers' views of colonial life, is implicit in his reporting of a country apparently so underhand as to ship in 'native idols' in an effort to exploit the industrious but innocent young men toiling for the good of Empire. As Nancy Henry points out in *George Eliot and the British Empire,* it was fictional moments such as this, as well as accounts by explorers, missionaries and emigrants, which shaped most people's impressions of Australia, Africa, India and 'The East', but alongside these literary sources, objects, too, offered a highly visible interpretation of cultures most people would never experience. Stephen's experience, however, emphasises the unstable, even false, nature of the evidence potentially offered by objects, and in so doing presents the Empire as the source of a disquieting disintegration of understood codes of behaviour, rather than simply an extended shopping warehouse.

Frustrated in his attempts to collect things, Stephen falls back instead on more traditional, and less equivocal, evidence of his industry and prudence, sending Elfride 'a deposit-note from the bank for the sum of two hundred pounds which had that day been added to her account' (186). Like Casaubon, Smith represents the business-like traveller, making journeys to further English projects. His travelling has little personal impact. Knight, however, continues to be affected by the disturbing influences of the foreign which are presented again as unsettling the self and disrupting accepted social forms of behaviour. 'I have come to you after all,' admits Knight at the end of the novel when he meets up again for the last time with Stephen Smith: 'My manner was odd this morning, and it seemed desirable to call; but that you had too much sense to notice, Stephen, I know. Put it down to my wanderings in France and Italy' (330).

The apparently deep-seated wariness of 'wanderings', the desire to fit exotic objects into a more easily graspable, and local, framework, was not simply an attempt to understand and locate the individual traveller like Henry Knight. The insecurities expressed in the mid-Victorian attitude to travel were intrinsically linked to the insecurities, personal and social, evoked by a rapidly expanding trade system, increasingly built upon a Free Trade structure which was dissolving commercial certainties. As trade, and the Empire, expanded, so too did the opportunities. The administrative and commercial infrastructures of Africa and India were providing employment for legions of impoverished gentlemen and younger sons, while ordinary workmen like Stephen Smith were being offered considerably broader horizons as well as the opportunity for the sudden accumulation of wealth. Emigration to far-flung parts of the Empire, particularly to Australia and New Zealand, was frequently

held up by British authorities as the solution to domestic problems, and colonization of often inhospitable regions as 'the remedy for the degenerative effects of civilization'.[32] Sophisticated returning travellers, however, were bringing alarming new perspectives alongside seductive foreign tales, while the caprices of trade held out the looming spectre of disastrous financial loss. The world was becoming simultaneously smaller and more uncertain. As early as 1829, Thomas Carlyle had noted in 'Signs of the Times' that the changing distribution of wealth created by new industries and increasing entrepreneurial opportunities had transformed existing social structures and was 'strangely altering the old relations'.[33] During the 1840s and 1850s, legislation to ease restrictions on trade further dislocated these 'old relations' and created opportunities for self-advancement.[34] As hereditary wealth was whittled away, the gentry classes could no longer be assumed to be more affluent simply on account of their social standing, and members of the aspiring and successful middle-classes sprang in a single generation from distinctly humble roots to glittering displays of money. In addition, wealthy and classless representatives of newly successful commercial nations – as portrayed by Trollope's American heroine Isabel Boncassen (1876) and James's Isabel Archer (1882) – were disrupting English marriage habits and social mores.

Perhaps even more significant than this social disturbance for the life of objects, however, was the economic insecurity which accompanied the increasing

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[32] Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.16-17.

[33] Thomas Carlyle, *Collected Works*, Library Edition, 31 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869-71), 7, p.371

[34] As well as the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, there were a number of acts specifically directed at creating free trade: the Navigation Acts of 1849 and 1854, for example; and the removal of duty on sugar (1854), soap (1853) and paper (1861).

engagement with trade speculation. In *Vanity Fair,* Thackeray, with one eye on mid-century habits, had satirised the endless, unsupported credit on which society was constructed during the Napoleonic years:

> Nobody in fact was paid. Not the blacksmith who opened the lock; nor the glazier who mended the pane; nor the jobber who let the carriage; nor the groom who drove it; nor the butcher who provided the leg of mutton; nor the coals which roasted it; nor the cook who basted it; nor the servants who ate it: and this I am given to understand is not unfrequently the way in which people live elegantly on nothing a-year. (360-1)

The society of *Vanity Fair* is one of illusory wealth, where any ready cash is gleaned from the most hazardous and uncertain sources – gambling, personal friendships, loans. Jos Sedley has had to uproot to India in order to find any chance of success and the only character who appears to be genuinely engaged in trade, the unhappy Mr Sedley, is ruined for his efforts. By the 1860s, very little had changed, although the ability to create an illusion of stable wealth had become perhaps more sophisticated, and the networks for servicing the illusion more embedded. In *Our Mutual Friend,* the Lammles manage to construct an apparently seamless picture of prosperity without any of the uncomfortable public machinations which vex Becky Sharp. In *Middlemarch,* Rosamond Lydgate concerns herself so little with the mathematics of income and expenditure that she is genuinely surprised to learn that her confident middle-class lifestyle is simply a thin veneer over a more disturbing reality. In a moment of truth her husband is forced to explain some of the intricacies of their distinctly insecure situation:

> It is enough for you to know that our income is likely to be a very narrow one, hardly four hundred, perhaps less, for a long time to come...That was only a security and behind the security there is a debt. And that debt must be paid within the next few months, else we shall have our furniture sold.
> (611)

Middlemarch is riddled with the presentation of shifting economic fortunes,

the 'vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence' (122). Set alongside the Lydgates' misfortune, for example, is the auction of Edwin Larcher's 'furniture, books and pictures,' the result of 'great success' and social expansion into a 'mansion' rather than 'the depression of trade'.[35] Yet, despite these occasional successes, the overall sense is of capital threatened, and wealth slipping through increasingly desperate fingers. It is in these circumstances that objects become significant, offering visual reassurance of ownership and domestic stability. In particular they allow the middle classes to mitigate any lingering sense of inferiority and to align themselves with the ancestral stability of the upper classes, where the provenance of objects locates them, and their owners, in an apparently simple linear structure of recorded history. The spectre of chaos lurking in the world outside the home is kept at bay through the engineering of material evidence that all is well: faced with financial ruin and social disgrace, Rosamond Lydgate 'arranged all objects around her with the same nicety as ever, only with more slowness' (827).

As objects and their owners hovered in this state of uncertainty, attempting to pin down personal values for posterity but being frustrated by the fundamentally insecure nature of the changing Victorian world, so the emerging municipal museum network offered a context beyond the home and its instabilities, apparently immune from personal and economic vacillations and with a timeless permanence and authority evident in the imposing classical facades and well-proportioned galleries. The museum display created a link between the local and the global, between objects

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[35] The fact that books and pictures, apparently more personal objects, are sold along with the furniture at the Larcher's auction suggests that they were collected largely as decoration, without particular private meaning, and so, like the furniture, can be upgraded with an upturn in fortune.

from familiar industries and those with exotic origins, and so mitigated the disturbing influence of the unfettered traveller. It recorded personal stories and made them visible with material evidence. It was bound to keep and display gifted objects, respecting the donor as a collector and benefactor, and so validating a lifetime's collecting. For the mid-Victorians, anxious to establish models of authority to counteract the disturbing fluidity of the contemporary world, the museum seemed to promise genuine permanence; a continuous, recorded life for objects detached from common pressures beyond.

Returning to the example of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, we can trace some of these anxieties and preoccupations in the early development of the collection. It is difficult, of course, to be sure about exact motives for donations, since donors were never asked, unfortunately, to record their reasons for giving and few acquisitions are accompanied by any more than the briefest record. However, from the slight evidence which does exist, I think it is possible to explore some of the ways in which this, and other similar regional museums, sprang from and fed into the mid-Victorian desire for authority and permanence. It is clear, for example, that objects with personal meanings were being given to the Museum in order to perpetuate a sense of family prestige: the items donated by Vaughan in 1868 were accompanied by a note in the accessions register explaining proudly that they had 'been in the Vaughan family for 50 years'.[36] In addition to this practical alternative to the ambiguities of personal and family legacy, however, I would argue that the establishment of the Museum was closely linked to other forms of authority, locally

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[36] John Allan, *A Revised Catalogue of the Collections of Polynesian Artefacts at Exeter City Museums,* unpublished. Archive of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.

and nationally: to the church, the emerging municipality, and to the wider state. The Museum was an integral part of an established network offering apparent long-term stability; its objects a visible manifestation of the possibility of order and permanence.

Like many museums, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum was founded by local men with a pride in city identity and a desire to show off municipal progress. In his examination of the boom in European collecting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Krzysztof Pomian traces similar motivations from the very early foundations of the museum movement: 'In general, the greater the degree of participation by individuals in the affairs of the state, the more they show a propensity to place their possessions at the disposal of the community', he notes.[37] Early museums were, suggests Pomian, founded and stocked by 'energetic types' who saw their involvement in the Museum simply as an extension of a wider civic profile. By the 1860s, in England, this tendency to make municipal service visible, and to connect it to the broader public good of extended Empire, had already seen an explosion in the number of public statues and memorials given by, and featuring, local townsmen. In addition, the naming of parks, streets and buildings further recorded the deeds of municipal leaders and benefactors in most towns. An integral part of this network of publicity and validation, museums provided yet another way for the public-spirited to make their mark. The driving force behind the establishment of Sunderland Museum and Library was Robert Cameron MP, a JP and temperance campaigner. At Exeter, the Memorial Museum was first proposed by Sir Stafford

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[37] Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800* (London: Polity Press, 1990), p.267.

Northcote of Pynes, a Member of Parliament for Devon (and former secretary to the Great Exhibition), while the site was donated by another MP, Richard Sommers Gard, who also laid the first stone in 1865. Intended as a memorial for the late Prince Consort, the naming of the Museum also firmly linked it to affairs of state and Empire. In addition, the Museum's role as educative tool for the working classes was explicit from the outset. Attached to the Museum and Art Gallery was to be a free library and a school of art with some additional provision for science classes, all aimed at improving educational opportunities for the working people of Exeter. The donation of objects to the Museum was not only, then, a personal act, but also a token of support for wider middle-class principles of liberal ideology, and an active engagement with the growing number of organisations which were attempting to reduce the perceived threat of social and political unrest through the construction of edifying public institutions.

It was not just the structures of town and state into which the new Museum so seamlessly slotted, however. The foundation of the Museum was also closely linked to existing networks focussed around the established Church. This was not, of course, unique to Exeter. Most models of Victorian authority happily combined sacred and secular membership: at the opening of the Great Exhibition Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of London, had been prompted by Prince Albert to preach on 'The Dignity of Labour' and the moral framework within which the glittering display of consumer goods could be considered. The founding of museums and art galleries was often part of a wider philanthropic scheme to bring education and culture to poor areas, sometimes in direct association with Christian missions. Toynbee Hall, for example, in East London was opened in 1873 by a Church of England curate, Samuel

Barnett and his wife Henrietta, and, alongside a range of social experiments to alleviate conditions for the poor, they encouraged the appreciation of works of art.[38] Robert Cameron, Chairman of the Museum and Art Gallery Committee in Sunderland, and Honorary Curator, was a lay preacher in both the Congregational and Primitive Methodist churches.

While Exeter was not unique, however, in this conjunction of church and state, the relative influence and residual power of the Church was inevitably more significant in smaller cities. Exeter, fourteenth in the league of relative sizes of provincial towns at the turn of the nineteenth century, was down to fortieth place by 1860. Yet as an ancient cathedral borough, it accommodated the full glory of episcopalian influence. In addition, although there was a marked population increase during the nineteenth century (from 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants), and although slum areas of the city were unusually slow to be improved (there were extensive food riots during the middle of the Nineteenth Century and the final slums were not tackled until the 1930s), Exeter saw less rapid expansion and less heavy industry than many more Northern towns, and so was less a stronghold for disestablishment forms of worship.

The new Museum fitted neatly into this ecclesiastical context. The building was designed by John Heywood, a local architect who had already done much work for the diocese and was part of the strong High Church movement of the South West. Many of the collections, too, owed their existence to churchmen. The earliest collections of foreign objects were put together in the 1850s and '60s by a

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[38] The Barnetts' work extended to opening the Whitechapel Art Gallery, in a slum area of the East End, in 1901.

missionary, the Rev. Henry Townsend who, born in Exeter in 1815, travelled first to Sierra Leone in 1836 and then to Abeokuta, an Egba kingdom inland from Lagos, in 1843. His souvenir objects offered an autobiographical account of his, and the church's, successes in Africa – they include, for example, an *Eshu* fetish figure given to Townsend by Chief Ogubonna, one of the most powerful Chief kings of Abeokuta, who positioned the figure at his door as protection against witchcraft, before his conversion to Christianity.[39] Townsend's work was of great interest to the people of Exeter who kept in touch with his exploits and funded the building of the Exeter Church, the first of its kind, in Abeokuta in 1859. One of the main contributors to the fund was Sir Thomas Acland, a founder member of the committee which met in 1862 to establish the principle of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum. Townsend's gift of his objects to the nascent Museum in 1868, eighteen years before his death, recorded not only his personal stories but the presence of the church in the heart of missionary Africa, reassuring the church-goers of Exeter that their money and their prayers were being well-spent in the creation of a more stable and correct world-order.

It was not just the hushed grandeur of the new museum galleries of the 1860s and '70s which evoked thoughts of the church, however. The museum visit, as much as the museum building, was in many ways modelled on the religious experience. As some commentators have pointed out, at a time when some of the central tenets of religion, the established church and the church-state monopoly, were under increasing attack, there was, ironically, an 'intensified religious life', not only from

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[39] Townsend's career offers a further example of the inextricable links between church and state. Queen Victoria sent a letter and Bibles to the Egba people and Prince Albert sent a steel corn-mill, all delivered by Townsend. For further information see G. Townsend, *Memoir of the Rev. Henry Townsend* (Exeter: James Townsend, 1887).

the new forms of observance but also 'a marked resurgence in the religious activity of the Church of England as well as new political actions to preserve its surviving advantages and to recapture lost ones'.[40] This revival and intensification of religious interest had, I would argue, an impact on the way museums were viewed. In the museum, as Stephen Greenblatt explores in his influential essay 'Resonance and Wonder', the distanced, de-personalised object creates a 'temple of wonder', a rarefied experience akin to religious worship. Greenblatt emphasises the ability of the object to create immediate and emotional responses in the viewer in which the uniqueness of the object is paramount. The visitor's reaction is rhapsodic: 'wonder,' asserts Greenblatt is: 'the power of the displaced object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention'.[41]

The sense that something magical and reverential was taking place in museums was a recurring theme in contemporary commentaries. The *Daily Echo,* for example, described the 'effect of the new museum', opened in Sunderland in 1879, as 'a transformation...a talismanic evolution from cobwebbed darkness to fairy brightness'.[42] Presenting decorative objects, often for the first time, in a rarefied environment of respect and careful display, the museums suppressed notions of proprietorship and questions of financial value in order to elevate the status of their objects into things of 'wonder'. Not only were they drawing on traditions of natural history display, but also on accounts of natural history investigation which had

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[40] Frank M. Turner, 'The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith that was Lost', in *Victorian Faith in Crisis* ed. by Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (London, MacMillan, 1990), 9-38 (p.13).
[41] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and Wonder', in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. by I. Karp and S. Levine (Washington and London: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42-56 (p.42).
[42] qtd. Jessop and Sinclair, *The Sunderland Museum: The People's Palace in the Park,* p.8.

frequently been presented within a theological context and couched in theological terms. Thomas Paley, for example, in his *Natural Theology* (1802) had pronounced the world to be 'wonderfully curious' and had encouraged the same act of wondering regard which the museums were later attempting to cultivate in their visitors:

> The world becomes a temple, and life itself one continued act of adoration...the works of nature only want to be contemplated. When contemplated, they have everything in them which can astonish by their greatness.[43]

Alongside the new theologies which were commonly challenging materialism, the museums were re-inventing objects within a context of moral and instructive scholarship which could be traced back through erudite theological and scientific arguments such as Paley's. Rather than emphasise the collecting of objects as conspicuous consumption, museums presented things in ordered histories which emphasised instead their ability to evoke a wonder close to divine worship.

Yet Greenblatt in his essay also describes museums as 'temples of resonance'. Here the reaction from the visitor is evoked not by the object's uniqueness but by its ability to create links with a range of contexts outside the museum, to stand as a physical representation of the exotic, and unseen, world beyond. 'Resonance,' as Greenblatt describes it, is :

> the power of the displayed 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 a viewer to stand. (42)

By drawing together the material fragments of personal stories, and presenting them in a coherent narrative, the museum, like the church, was attempting to offer visitors a structured, validated way of seeing the world. Again this was a model deeply rooted

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[43] Thomas Paley, *Natural Theology* (London: Bohn, 1856), pp.136-7.

in the intersection between natural history and theology: Paley's comment that 'we can observe' in the natural world 'marks of a common relation, as well to one another as to the elements of which their habitation is composed' could equally describe the displays of manufactured objects being pieced together by the new museums.[44]

In many ways, however, the confident manipulation of objects by the early museums within an established context of theological practice and discussion was as illusory as many of the more personal meanings I have been exploring. In his discussion of European museums, Pomian notes that the establishment of a museum often replaced, rather than strengthened, the role of the established church: 'Museum numbers grew in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at the same pace as the disaffection of the populations, especially the urban ones, with traditional religion'.[45] Although at its early stages during the 1860s and '70s, this movement to replace the sacred with the secular, highlighted challenges to the very structures from which the museums had grown and from which they gained authority. Craving physical evidence to support the growing number of novel scientific theories, many museum visitors used the displays of natural history and geology collections, for example, to extend and corroborate ideas which directly challenged the established teachings of the church rather than to gaze in rapt, unquestioning awe. While the displays of decorative objects may, in themselves, have appeared to offer less of a threat to traditional ideas, the new insights into the self and mankind which were being made possible within the museum environment necessarily affected the public's

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[44] ibid. p.136.
[45] Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities,* p.43.

relationships to all the exhibits.

Museums were straddling the old and the new; representing the established interests and received wisdom from which they, in part, emerged, and simultaneously presenting evidence of the new priorities and shifts in knowledge which were transforming Victorian life. To some extent the objects on display were required to offer reassurance in an unsettling world but just as the apparent security of the family heirloom was subject to unpredictable undermining forces of personality, law and circumstance, so too the potential security offered by the object within the museum was similarly unreliable. Objects on display often challenged, rather than reinforced, what had been regarded as immutable codes against which people were able to define and understand themselves. In the nascent discipline of the decorative arts, where many collections were dependent on personal gifts and offered piecemeal narratives of design and manufacture alongside stories of foreign travel, obscure trade or ancient craft, what the museums were presenting was not a reassuring timeless continuum, evidenced in material display, but rather something more akin to the 'stupendous fragmentariness' which accosts Dorothea Brook on her first visit to Rome in *Middlemarch,* a complex assortment of frequently contradictory resonances which unsettled, contested, and sometimes disappointed, the viewer's sense of self.

For Dorothea, the naive, untutored museum visitor, the objects she sees act not to support her in a conventional role as young wife, but only to heighten the 'dream-like strangeness' of a confused state which arises from the stirring of a defiant selfhood:

> She had been led through the best galleries, had been taken to the chief points of view, had been shown the greatest ruins and the most glorious churches, and she had ended by oftenest choosing to drive out to the Campagna where she could feel alone with the earth and the sky, away

> from the masquerade of ages, in which her own life too seemed to become a masque with enigmatical costumes. (181)

Eliot's language traces the rejection of a passive state - 'she had been led...had been taken...had been shown' - for an active 'choosing' of escape from the 'enigmatical' presentations of material things to the uncomplicated timelessness of the Campagna. Rather than embrace the histories and continuities presented by Rome, Dorothea is disturbed by its apparent incoherence and contradictions, by the 'gigantic broken revelations' which challenge the narrow inner life of 'a girl who had been brought up in English and Swiss Puritanism'. The impressions of the city force themselves on her as simultaneously fragmentary and meaningful, but she lacks the experience to make sense of what she sees:

> Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present, where all that was living and warm-blooded seemed sunk in the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reverence; the dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world: all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. (181)

For many museum visitors, as for Dorothea, the viewing of objects was an act of conflicts, a 'glut of confused ideas', in which knowledge and emotion, deep-rooted habits and newly-emerging facts, all played a part. The continual tension between the emotional impact of the object, and the knowledge required by the viewer to trace 'suppressed transitions' and 'unite all contrasts', is at the heart of the museum experience. Gazing on the personal histories of others, either preserved in the museum case or in the 'Titanic life' of a city such as Rome, allows a reconsideration of the self which springs partly from an emotional and partly from an intellectual

response.

The desire to secure one's place in posterity through the giving of objects, to bind oneself to a network which promises 'the quickening power of a knowledge which breathes a growing soul into all historic shapes, and traces out the suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts' is, as Dorothea's experience demonstrates, a desire to root the inner self in a less confusing and contradictory world (181). But as Dorothea discovers, 'the quickening power of knowledge', and the understanding of the self which accompanies it, is not so easily achieved. For Eliot, the key lies in personal growth through experience, where experience is bound to memory, however painful, and recollections of the past become immediate and visual:

> Our moods are apt to bring with them images which succeed each other like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze; and in certain states of dull forlornness Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St Peter's... (182)

The remembered objects, as in Greenblatt's description of the 'resonance' of the museum experience, continue to evoke complex, dynamic reactions even when they are no longer physically present. For Dorothea, this experience is essentially a moral one, a way of placing, and attempting to understand, oneself within a wider historic community.

As Eliot's descriptions of Dorothea's experience in Rome demonstrate, by the 1870s there was an increasing understanding that the nature of the self was inextricably bound to the nature of memory. Although earlier writers, like Wordsworth, had been exploring similar ideas, there was, as Sally Shuttleworth notes, a shift in the mid-nineteenth century after the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859: memory was no longer the reassuring, controllable core of the self, but something altogether more undisciplined and unintelligible.

'Memory...ceases to be the grounding of individual coherence and becomes, instead, the very element which lies outside personal control,' asserts Shuttleworth.[46] What had been celebrated as a power for order and self-control became understood instead as a more unsettling force which demonstrated humankind's inescapable relationship to animals, and the individual's powerlessness in the face of external shaping forces. This changing understanding of memory and the past was, as we have seen, reflected in both fictional and actual relationships to objects – while the self, or parts of the self, were located in memories of the past, and these personal and cultural histories were evidenced through things, yet the unreliable nature of both the self and the things representing the self, ruptured linear understandings and disrupted the much-desired ability to order and explain the past.

In the late 1840s, therefore, in an unusually sentimental passage in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray romanticises the process of memory and its attachment to things:

> The landlord and the landlady of the house led the worthy Major into the Sedley's room (whereof he remembered every single article of furniture, from the old brass ornamented piano, once a natty little instrument, Stothard make, to the screens and the alabaster miniature-tombstone, in the midst of which ticked Mr. Sedley's gold watch)...(561)

Major Dobbin's unswerving loyalty in love is signalled by his remembrance of 'every single article of furniture', now accruing additional layers of meaning inspired by loss. Dobbin and the remembered objects of the Sedley household become almost interchangeable: both dependable and apparently permanent, both touched by sadness. Just as the piano was 'once a natty little instrument' but is reduced to being simply 'old', so Dobbin too, it is implied, is wearied and aged by his life experience.

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[46] Sally Shuttleworth, '"The Malady of Thought": Embodied Memory in Victorian Psychology and the Novel', in *Memory and Memorials 1789-1914*, ed. by Matthew Campbell, Jacqueline M. Labbe and Sally Shuttleworth (London and New York, Routledge, 2000), 46-59 (p.55).

By the 1870s, in *Middlemarch,* this sentimentalised relationship between memory, objects and the self has become more complex. Eliot presents what Isobel Armstrong has identified as 'a challenge to the common epistemology of realism as representation which assumes a stable relationship between subject and object'.[47] Instead of the timeless continuum of domestic life evidenced by Dobbin and the Sedley furnishings, there are 'changing perspectives, lights and shadows, *images'* which affect both our reading of character and the things around them.[48] Dorothea, entering among familiar things as Major Dobbin does, finds instead of a listing of romantic associations that 'Each remembered thing in the room was disenchanted' (308). The objects, instead of acting simply as prompts for memory, stimulate a process of problematic self-examination which draws Dorothea into confronting uncomfortable fragments of personal and family history:

> ...it was the miniature of Mr. Casaubon's aunt Julia, who had made the unfortunate marriage – of Will Ladislaw's grandmother...Was it only her friends who thought her marriage unfortunate? Or did she herself find it out to be a mistake, and taste the salt bitterness of her tears in the merciful silence of the night? What breadths of experience Dorothea seemed to have passed over since she first looked at this miniature! She felt a new companionship with it...(308)

Hereditary objects, like the miniature, are no longer bound simply to an ordered understanding of the past, but are re-created through the viewer's own identity. The posterity which is apparently gained through material presence is reinvented as an active contribution to the future; the past is linked to the present through the intervention of things. When Will Ladislaw leaves Middlemarch, apparently for ever,

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[47] Isobel Armstrong, 'Technology and Text: Glass Consciousness and Nineteenth-Century Culture', in *Culture, Landscape and the Environment: The Linacre Lectures 1997,* ed. by Kate Flint and Howard Morphy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 149-175, p.172.
[48] ibid.

Dorothea 'took down the miniature from the wall and kept it before her' (591). Her

feelings of loss are directed through the object cradled in her hand; the family

heirloom becomes a catalyst for, and ultimately subsumed into, her individual present

and future:

> ...she took the little oval picture in her palm and made a bed for it there...She
> did not know then that it was Love who had come to her briefly as in a dream
> before awaking...that it was Love to whom she was sobbing her farewell...She
> only felt that there was something irrevocably amiss and lost in her lot, and
> her thoughts about the future were the more readily shapen into resolve. (592)

This evolution of the use and understanding of objects from simple prompts

for nostalgic longing to more complicated agents in the growth of the self was, as we

have seen, both personal and public, domestic and municipal. Locating the past in

objects for future generations, making Dickens's connections between 'inanimate and

senseless things, and the object of recollection', was no longer so straightforward

since, as Eliot demonstrates, it is the immediate responses of the viewer which are

dominant: for Dorothea, it is 'her lot' and 'her thoughts' which the object prompts

rather than memories of other owners or appreciation of wider meanings. The

increasing preoccupation with exploring the self which writers like Eliot

demonstrated during the 1860s and 1870s, and the growing number of personal

stories located in the collections of the emerging museums, created, perhaps

inevitably, an increasingly complex attitude towards the way in which objects, and

the selves they represented, were displayed. If meanings were no longer secure for

posterity, then they were surely subject to re-presentation and renegotiation. My next

chapter explores the development of this complex appetite for display, as household

gods emerged not as 'monuments' of a secure and longed-for past but as shifting and

ambiguous indicators of a precarious present.

3. The Taste for Display:
Objects on Show in Public and Private.

*Our first toy is love – our second, display, according as our
ambition prompts us to exert it. Some place it in horses – some in
honours, some in feasts, and some – voici un exemple – in furniture or
pictures.*[1]

The desire to show off, to interpret oneself to other people through the display

of things, was, as this quote from *Pelham* (1828) shows, not new to the 1850s and

'60s. The gathering pace of consumerism throughout the eighteenth century, and the

evolution of an aspiring middle-class, invested display with growing social

significance, and, as Glanville here comments, much of this display was focussed on

things which could be shown in the home. In his examination of the eighteenth

century, Paul Langford highlights the emergence of a fashion for domestic display

from the early 1700s, identifying the 'immense' change which was taking place in

people's physical surroundings and the appearance of: '[a] wealth of trinkets,

novelties, and knick-knacks, in the French, Chinese, or Indian 'manner' which

invaded many homes...Ornament for its own sake was as important as functional

design'.[2] The desirability of these new display pieces was perhaps exemplified most

clearly in the mania for porcelain which gripped the royalty and nobility of Europe

during the eighteenth century and which was adopted by the English rich and middle

classes in their enthusiasm for fashionable ceramics from makers such as

Wedgwood. By 1828, in Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham,* Reginald Glanville is describing

display not merely as a fashionable past-time, a 'toy', but as second only to love (and

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[1] Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Pelham; or the Adventures of a Gentleman* (London: Routledge, 1828),
p.174.
[2] Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (London: Guild, 1989), p.70.

associated by implication with the public appearance of love) as something demanding energetic engagement by the socially-aspiring, 'according as our ambition prompts us'. By the second half of the nineteenth century, this appetite for the display of things had been further nourished by an increasingly tempting range of available objects which was more extensive than ever before and which allowed the consumer to choose a public identity grounded in anything from the Rococo to the Gothic revival. Moreover, with the emergence of the network of regional museums and the popularity of the landmark International Exhibitions of manufacturing wares, the display of objects was not restricted to a focus on the domestic space. Consumers could compare their choice of objects with choices made by other people, not just through private visiting, but through the complex interchanges taking place in the shop and the museum.

The great glass showcase of the Crystal Palace made possible all kinds of extravagant public display. Crowds gorged on the glittering cabinets of things to buy, or to aspire to buy; speculating on the trappings of an ideal home or lifestyle became a fashionable leisure activity. Moreover, as many critics have noted, visitors to the exhibition came as much to display themselves and to view the human curiosities from other social classes and geographical areas, as to study the cream of British manufacturing.[3] In October 1851, towards the close of the show, *The Times* noted that: 'the people have now become the exhibition'.[4] The dazzling sensual feast of the Great Exhibition suggested, as Thomas Richards has explored, that the whole of human life and endeavour could be represented by the display of things. Combining

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[3] See, for example, Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, and Miller, *Novels Behind Glass*.
[4] Leader, *The Times*, 8 October 1851, p.3.

the alluring abundance of the commercial store with the educative values which the founding committees believed were the purpose of the Exhibition, the Crystal Palace was 'at one and the same time...a museum and a market'.[5] It lead directly to the establishment of the South Kensington Museum in 1862 from the profits of the exhibition, with Henry Cole, a key member of the Exhibition Committee, as the Museum's first Director. Yet the show in the Crystal Palace was firmly focussed on objects manufactured for the home and for sale in the shops. Drawing together, for the first time, a number of models of display, it allowed objects to be compared and measured as never before. As Andrew Miller has discussed in *Novels Behind Glass,* the 'pleasure of consuming displays' could be indulged for its own sake and 'the technologies of display and exchange...help to define what is valuable and worth representing'.[6] This quest to define value and worth was, as Reginald Glanville had recognised in *Pelham,* a quest to define oneself and one's position in a social network which was dependent upon the demonstration of taste evidenced through the display of things. As these things became increasingly abundant, and as people became increasingly adept at manipulating such visible expressions of taste, so the interactions between objects on show in personal domestic spaces and in more public arena became increasingly complex.

In the years following the Great Exhibition fiction writers began to address the rich meanings inherent in the presentation of domestic space, and the ways in which individuals were becoming identified with, and by, their choice of household things. So in *North and South* (1855), Elizabeth Gaskell reinforces Margaret Hale's

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[5] Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England,* p.19.
[6] Miller, *Novels Behind Glass,* pp.88-9.

position as genteel heroine in the description of the home she creates in Milton:

> Here were no mirrors, not even a scrap of glass to reflect the light...no gilding, a warm, sober breadth of colouring, well-relieved by the dear old Helston chintz-curtains and chair covers. An open davenport stood in the window opposite the door; in the other there was a stand, with a tall china vase, from which drooped wreaths of English ivy...and books, not cared for on account of their bindings solely, lay on one table, as if recently put down.[7]

The weighty and aged objects on display have both personal meaning – the Helston chintz becomes 'dear' because of family associations – and also act to present a public face from which visitors, as well as the reader, can begin to piece together clues about character. Margaret's sitting room is suggestive of a serious approach to education – 'books, not cared for on account of their bindings solely' – and traditional values. It is, we are asked to note, 'English' ivy which creates the simple decoration. Just as Margaret and her father are set apart from Milton society by their more genteel ways, so the objects they display (albeit quietly) in their home set them apart from other households in the town.

The description of the parlour comes at a turning point in the novel, when John Thornton first becomes attracted to Margaret. Visiting the Hale household to take lessons from Margaret's father, he becomes acutely aware of the contrast between his mother's parlour and the quiet Hale rooms. Gaskell emphasises the personal journey Thornton is about to make by focussing on the nuances of domestic display. Margaret's character is shown to Thornton and the reader through her things, while Thornton's awakening to the more refined lifestyle that the Hales represent takes place more through an appreciation of the 'sober breadth of colouring' in the

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[7] Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.79. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

drawing room than of the Classics he has come to learn. In his lessons with Mr Hale, Gaskell suggests, Thornton will be taught not only the rudiments of a gentleman's education, but also other, equally important, gentlemanly sensitivities: a feeling for subtle and 'tasteful' display and a critical eye for the vulgar showiness of the newly-rich. The implication is that the value of Margaret as wife to Thornton (and the chances of their marital happiness) will only increase as he becomes more aware of the values assigned to her objects, since her identity is bound up in the things she displays in her home: 'all these graceful cares were habitual to the family; and especially of a piece with Margaret' (79).

Just as the calm Hale parlour inspires Thornton to self-improvement, so when Margaret is first subjected, in turn, to the sight of the Thornton drawing room, she also begins to appreciate the distance between her own poor but genteel household and the Thornton's rich but irrevocably commercial life in which conversation was founded on 'nouns that were signs of things which gave evidence of wealth' (170). Margaret is dazzled and bewildered by an unfamiliar display which places this 'evidence of wealth' at the heart of family identity: 'Every cover was taken off, and the apartment blazed forth in yellow silk damask and a brilliantly-flowered carpet. Every corner seemed filled up with ornament' (213). Ivy wreaths have been replaced by 'brilliantly-flowered' carpets, the 'sober breadth of colouring' by a 'blaze' of yellow. Just as Margaret's desirable femininity was articulated in her drawing room, so Mrs Thornton's brash, almost masculine personality, is embodied in hers. Active with her son in the running of the family business, Mrs Thornton speaks 'unpalatable truths' (97); she is:

> a large-boned lady...her features like her frame were strong and massive...[a] firm, severe, dignified woman, who never gave way in

street-courtesy, or paused in her straight-onward course to the clearly-defined end which she proposed to herself. (76)

While her parlour attempts to create a conventional female atmosphere of middle-class luxury, its bright colours and cluttered ornament offer instead an extension of both her more masculine forthright characteristics and the professional manufacturing world she inhabits. It looks out 'into the great mill-yard', and is literally and metaphorically overshadowed by the presence of the mill 'looming high on the left hand side...casting a shadow down from its many stories, which darkened the summer evening before its time' (160). Mrs Thornton's drawing-room conversation turns on the engine room, the striking mill hands and the future of the business; her decorative objects, deprived of a context of female care, can have no other role than as indicators of that business success. In the parallel passages describing the display of the two parlours, Gaskell encapsulates everything that is different in the habits, traditions and priorities of the two women and their families, one evincing authorial approval the other authorial irony, and even pity. In order to win Margaret's hand, Thornton has to do more than win her heart: he has to show himself sufficiently alive to the nuances of identity expressed through the display of objects to prove himself potentially worthy of Gaskell's heroine.

As Thornton's conversion to the Hale approach to interior decoration suggests, fiction was beginning to explore the ways in which taste could be seen as rooted in the performance of display rather than as an inherent characteristic. It was something that could be learnt – and as such, the display of good taste was equally a display of well-directed education. In 1866, John Ruskin asserted confidently that 'the entire object of true education is to make people not merely <u>do</u> the right thing,

but <u>enjoy</u> the right thing',[8] and two years later, an article in *Cornhill* pointed out that readers could acquire good taste through diligent study, since 'there is a correct and an incorrect taste, a right and a wrong, independent of a person's individual likings'.[9] The proliferation of guidance material during the 1860s and 1870s demonstrated this growing association of the schooling of taste with wider principles of education, although it failed to come to an agreement about the exact location of the 'right thing' which Ruskin had celebrated. Even by 1878, when Charles Eastlake published his *Hints on Household Taste*, one of the most influential of the manuals, commentators were still struggling to define the notion of good taste. While Eastlake is confident in dismissing 'the general impression...that it is the peculiar inheritance of gentle blood, and independent of all family', he finds it more difficult to discover positive definitions (or to explain why he should be in a position to act as guide and arbiter).[10] Instead he locates good taste in a distant but unspecified past, a simpler, pre-consumer idyll which escapes the complications of the contemporary world, where objects had few or no meanings, somewhere 'more than two hundred years ago' (295); an 'ancient glory' (296) which sits in contrast to 'the heterogeneous assemblage of modern rubbish' (135).

The continuing attempts to define and control taste through publication and demonstration suggested a nervous appreciation of the power of domestic habits to affect more public interactions. *North and South*, for example, linked the reform of taste not only to reform of the self and one's own home (and the suggestion of

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[8] John Ruskin, 'Crown of Wild Olive', in *Works*, 18, p.343.

[9] F. T. Palgrave, 'How to Form a Good Taste in Art', *Cornhill Magazine*, 28 (August 1868), 170-180 (p.171).

[10] Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste*, p.8. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

romantic success), but also to Thornton's revolutionary industrial practices and the transformation of his attitude to the workforce. The correct appreciation of objects was now widely understood to have broad social and even political implications. In *Hints on Household Taste,* Eastlake asserts that only by reforming 'drawing-room taste' could there be hope for wider improvements in art and manufacture and, ultimately, Britain's standing in the international markets. In the display of things in the home, much was at stake.

With this realisation that the presentation and appreciation of objects had far-reaching consequences, came a corresponding disquiet about the notion of display. The potential for the viewers of a display to read into it unlicensed meanings, and the understanding that the education of taste could never be universal, meant that displays potentially inhabited a maverick place within the managed education advocated by commentators like Ruskin and *The Cornhill.* In particular there was an unease about the ways in which women could consume display: most of the taste manuals were explicitly directed at a female readership. It was the women of the household who were responsible for its presentation to the outside world, and it was the women who, as Eastlake asserts, were seen to be particularly at risk from over-indulgence in the 'silly knick-knacks which too frequently crowd a drawing-room table' (126). Eastlake's *Hints* demonstrates the awareness that it had become impossible to disentangle the reception of the objects in the home and the refinements of taste from his reader's sense of self:

> We may condemn a lady's opinion on politics – criticise her handwriting – correct her pronunciation of Latin, and disparage her favourite author with a chance of escaping displeasure. But if we venture to question her taste – in the most ordinary sense of the word, we are sure to offend. (8-9)

With this correspondence between a woman and her things, the excessive display of

'silly knick-knacks' became evidence of potentially unsettling excess in other, more profound, areas of life.

This unease about how women used display had been evident since the opening of the Great Exhibition. The exuberant and highly-visual show of the Crystal Palace, it was suggested, was too sensual for the female visitor and might be responsible for encouraging a range of unnatural appetites. Just as entry to the Exhibition allowed England's classes to mix in a single space, so it allowed men and women to brush shoulders in an environment implying sexual, as well as manufacturing, display.[11] In its description of the women flocking to view the Koh-i-noor diamond, for example, *Punch* was to use language which emphasised not so much the object on show, as the highly-physical, sexually-charged experience of the women themselves who 'push, and pant, and pinch their way amongst each other to see it'.[12]

For contemporary commentators, women were ranked alongside the poor who, it was feared, might not be able to control themselves in this stimulating new environment. A report in *The Times* noted with some amazement that the 'masses' were 'well-dressed, orderly and sedate,' in contrast to the disorder and raucous behaviour which had clearly been expected. In fact, the poorer classes, rather than rioting, were not only demonstrating surprisingly genteel manners, but, further, were: 'earnestly engaged in examining all that interests them, not quarrelsome or obstinate, but playing with manifest propriety and good temperament the important part

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[11] Nearly twenty years after the Great Exhibition, *The Saturday Review* was still suggesting that female engagement with the arts was intrinsically linked to sexual display and flirtation: 'Loving and studying art for its own sake' rather than as a means of attracting a husband was only likely to leave the 'aesthetic woman', 'solitary, despised, eccentric, and blue'. *The Saturday Review*, 25 (February 1868), pp.165-6.

[12] *Punch*, 21 (July 1851), p.10.

assigned to them at this gathering'.[13] Women, however, were in danger of weakening under the temptations. In one *Punch* cartoon, middle-class ladies are shown resisting eviction at closing time with a defiant, even violent, show of solidarity. They challenge the authority represented by the police and oppose 'the civil power at the point of the parasol':

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PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.

THE LADIES AND THE POLICE.—THE BATTLE OF THE CRYSTAL PALACE

Fig. 1: 'The Ladies and the Police.- The Battle of the Crystal Palace'. *Punch*, 20 (May 1851), p.202.

Other cartoons suggested that domestic, as well as civil, authority was also being challenged: in 'The Awful Result of Giving a Season Ticket to Your Wife' a disgruntled husband comes home to an empty house, to be told by the maid that 'Missus went early to the Exhibition with some Lunch in a Basket, and said she

[13] *The Times*, 29 May 1851, p.7.

shouldn't be home until Tea Time'.[14] Tempted by the glitter of display, women were in danger of neglecting their domestic role and making themselves unfit for decent society through their obsession with the viewing of things.

As the *Punch* cartoons imply, the display of domestic things was intrinsically entangled with the display of the female in her household setting and as such had profound implications for her marital happiness. During the 1850s and 1860s, this sense that the desire for spectacle might represent a perversion of more seemly female desires was becoming increasingly embedded in fictional representations which, alongside the instruction manuals, offered a guide to 'good taste'. In *Pendennis* (1850), Thackeray goes to great lengths to describe Lady Clavering's 'gorgeous dining-room' and 'the chaste splendour of the drawing-room'. His extended description of the furniture and ornament not only reflects the eclectic profusion of the domestic display but, further, suggests confusion and an overpowering, almost threatening, sense of clutter:

> There were, indeed, high-backed Dutch chairs of the seventeenth century; there was a sculptured carved buffet of the sixteenth; there was a sideboard robbed of the carved work of a church in the Low Countries, and a large brass cathedral lamp over the round oak table; there were old family portraits from Wardour Street, and a tapestry from France, bits of armour, double-handed swords and battle-axes made of *carton-pierre*, looking-glasses, statuettes of saints, and Dresden china...about the room were high chairs and low chairs, bandy-legged chairs, chairs so attenuated that it was a wonder any but a sylph could sit upon them, marqueterie tables covered with marvellous gimcracks, china ornaments of all ages and countries, bronzes, gilt daggers, Books of Beauty, yataghans, Turkish papooses and boxes of Persian bon-bons. Wherever you sate down there were Dresden shepherds and shepherdesses convenient at your elbow; there were, moreover, light blue poodles and ducks

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[14] 'The Workings of the Great Exhibition', *Punch*, 20 (July 1851), p.227. Towards the end of the exhibition, the displays were being seen as a threat to male domestic responsibility as well as female. In 'The Cosmopolitan Before and After the Exhibition,' an abandoned wife writes to *Punch* 'pray so no more of universal brotherhood, but direct the attention of husbands to the manufactures of domestic utility which are to be seen there, and tell them that family affection should begin at home – and if you will add that it ought to end there'. *Punch*, 23 (September 1851), p.44.

and cocks and hens in porcelain...[15]

Entwined with Lady Clavering's choice of objects for display is also a moral message for visitors to read. The dining room, notes Thackeray, is 'very chaste...that being the proper phrase'. Society, it is implied, wants to see evidence of objects used not simply as extravagant adornment but as an indication of moral as much as social stature; an example of decorative things tastefully used to create the perfect home rather than signs of uncontrollable female desire: 'nothing, in a word, could be chaster' repeats Thackeray of Lady Clavering's display. Yet the anticipated reading of her diverse and impressive collection is undermined by both authorial irony and Lady Clavering's own commentary:

> Poor Lady Clavering, meanwhile, knew little regarding these things, and had a sad want of respect for the splendours around her. 'I only know they cost a precious deal of money. It's all the upholsterer's doings.'[16]

The objects may appear to represent 'everything that comfort could desire and the most elegant taste desire' but, unconnected as they are to Lady Clavering's sense of self, they are shown to be nothing more than the exercise of a financial exchange. The overwhelming scale and variety of the display, the passage suggests, acts to suppress and intimidate, rather than bolster, Lady Clavering's personality. Paradoxically, her actual identity is represented not in the objects someone else has chosen to display for her, but in her detachment from them. Social judgment, however, continues to be bound to the visual clues she offers through her things which, as Thackeray reiterates, provide reassurance that she is irreproachable,

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[15] William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis, his Fortunes and Misfortunes, his Friends and his Greatest Enemy*, ed. by Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.413-4.
[16] ibid, p.415.

conventional and 'chaste'.

In *Wives and Daughters* (1864-5) the moral and personal implications of 'tasteful' choices which Elizabeth Gaskell had observed in *North and South,* and which Thackeray begins to explore in *Pendennis,* become fundamental to relationships within the novel. So the new Mrs Gibson is introduced in a flurry of activity centred around the acquiring and displaying of objects. Like Margaret Hale, Molly has been identified with solid, old-fashioned, unassuming furnishings associated with a happier time when her mother was alive and her family complete. In much the same way as Eastlake located the ideal good taste in a perfect but unidentified historical period, so Molly's unimpeachable things have come from a vague but tasteful past. Her domestic environment simultaneously reassures the reader that she is free from any expensive engagement with an unstable consumer culture and indicates her suitability for becoming a charming and unspoiled wife. Mrs Gibson's threat to Molly's future, particularly in the introduction of the dangerous and seductive Mr Preston, is signalled from the outset by a domestic upheaval which replaces Molly's old things with shiny new ones:

> 'You shall have your [room] done as well,' Mrs Gibson enthuses to Molly:
> 'A little French bed, a new paper, and a pretty carpet, and a dressed-up *toilette*-table and glass, will make it look quite a different place.'
> 'But I don't want it to look different. I like it as it is. Pray don't do anything to it.'
> 'What nonsense, child! I never heard anything more ridiculous! Most girls would be glad to get rid of furniture only fit for the lumber-room.'[17]

Unlike Molly, Mrs Gibson is seduced by the dictates of a fashionable lifestyle which extends from dress and personal appearance to a sense of the self presented outside

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[17] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters,* ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.189. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

the body, and from which the reader comes to suspect a personal instability and even moral deficiency. Just as Molly is defined as a suitably uncorrupted and sensitive potential wife by her adherence to unglamorous objects, 'only fit for the lumber-room', so her step-mother's preoccupation with things is shown to undermine the ideals of romantic love and youthful innocence which Molly represents. Gaskell emphasises Mrs Gibson's shallow worldliness by suggesting that the decision to marry into the Gibson family hinged on a comparison of lifestyles defined by decorative objects: the alternative to marrying Mr Gibson would be a return to life as schoolmistress and an end to dinner 'sent up on old Chelsea china' (100). Mrs Gibson's unsuitability for a happy marriage with the genteel doctor is signalled in this moment of fastidiousness and further developed as she begins to demonstrate an insatiable appetite for display which, Gaskell implies, is inappropriate for a married woman. Unlike Lady Clavering, Mrs Gibson has a hands-on understanding of the objects she chooses for her home, and of the meanings inherent in them.

This subversion of 'natural' female instincts by the desires stimulated by display is signalled most clearly when, in a fit of unusually high spirits, Molly and Cynthia indulge in some impromptu indoor dancing. It is one of their final acts of joyous mutual play before the secrets of Cynthia's past catch up with her, and it comes at a time when Mrs Gibson's machinations as bad mother, fragile socialite and unsuitable wife are being reinforced by Preston's increasing intrusion into the plot. The happy, open nature of the girls' dance is, however, inhibited by the environment Mrs Gibson has created. They perform 'to the imminent danger of the various little tables, loaded with "*objets d'art*" (as Mrs Gibson delighted to call them) with which the drawing-room was crowded' (448). The nature of the *objets d'art* is clearly

unimportant. As Andrew Miller has pointed out in his discussion of objects of fashionable status in *Vanity Fair,* an object's identity often becomes subsumed to its role as signifier: 'That the candlesticks were Louis Quatorze and the blotting book mother-of-pearl matters less than that they support Fifine in her progress up the social scale'.[18] Mrs Gibson, too, is climbing the social ladder. Even if her unsuitability for her new milieu was not evident in her speech or dress, it is implied, her desire to display will always act as a give away for poor breeding. The nature of the *objets d'art* is unimportant because it is not the objects themselves which are intrinsically suspect – it is the display of them, and the lack of sensitivity to social mores which this implies. In the display of objects which, ironically, Mrs Gibson believes demonstrates her perfection as wife and social hostess, she is defined as the inadequate outsider with uncertain class credentials, a woman who may be ill-placed to guide the heroine Molly through her romantic entanglements.

The language Gaskell employs in this dancing episode turns the moment into a distillation of all that is wrong in the Gibson household. As in the Clavering display, excess is everywhere evident: the tables are 'loaded' and the room 'crowded', human interactions are subsumed and forced out by the intrusion of too many things into the Gibsons' personal space. Just as the objects become divorced from personal history and are presented simply as social signifiers, so people (especially Molly and her father) are becoming distanced from the emotional ties of the past and hemmed in by an increasingly vacuous – and threatening – social network. Mrs Gibson, who 'delights' in both the display of her things, and the display of fashionable French phrases to define them (she had, of course, earlier

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[18] Miller, *Novels Behind Glass,* p.33.

urged Molly to enjoy 'a little French bed' and 'a dressed-up *toilette* table'), is the outsider whose objects link her to a mysterious, less-than-genteel past in France. (Indeed it is worth noting that Mr Preston, another remnant of the shady past, also has a house filled with 'curiosities' (161).) The objects are presented as fashionable additions which fail to integrate into the Gibson drawing room – they are perched vulnerably on 'various little tables' – suggestive of the ways in which Mrs Gibson, too, has failed to become part of the household. She remains unattached and disposable. Just as the drawing room would be more spacious and comfortable with its *objets d'art* removed, so, it is suggested, the removal of Mrs Gibson would allow the family to return seamlessly to the former happiness of a more simple life.

Mrs Gibson's crowded drawing room is presented in contrast to the Hamley household which is traditional, solid and representative of the good taste of a history of good breeding. Hamley Hall is 'threadbare' with 'stands of plants, great jars of flowers, old Indian china and cabinets' giving a 'pleasant aspect' (66). It is Gaskell's 'good taste' which is on display here to inform and influence the reader, an understated splendour which considers itself superior to the popular, glittering taste both reflected in, and created by, events like the Great Exhibition and then transposed to characters like Mrs Gibson. This tension between old and new, the respect for quiet traditional decoration, and the scorn of modern spectacle, which the admiration of Hamley Hall suggests, was not new to the nineteenth century. In *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), for example, Frances Sheridan articulated a similar critique of brash contemporary taste: the pretensions of Lady Sarah Bidulph, described as 'neither handsome nor genteel', are amply illustrated by 'an unnecessary

display of splendour' in 'a most sumptuous drawing-room'.[19] A century later, however, the unease with the idea of display has become linked to more widespread debates connecting presentation within the home to arguments about the nature of humankind and society.

Just as taste was located, Eastlake suggested, somewhere in the past, 'more than two hundred years ago', so novelists like Gaskell were creating models of good taste based on the ancestral values of places such as Hamley Hall, which had been 'fitted up...at some distant period' (66). While Mrs Gibson's attachment to the new, and her lack of sensitivity to the development of family and social history, is inextricably linked with her suspect judgment, it is the naturalist Roger Hamley, steeped in an understanding of evolution, who emerges as the novel's romantic hero, and (despite his brief infatuation with Cynthia) comes to provide the touchstone of sense and good taste. The fictional setting of decorative objects in *Wives and Daughters* fortified the growing recognition of human physical evolution by equating it with a growing historical understanding of how to use and value things. Whereas, in *North and South,* the Thornton parlour was a physical and conceptual extension of the mill, Hamley Hall is presented as an extension of the neat and pleasant grounds beyond:

> There were five high, long windows on one side of the room, all opening to the prettiest bit of flower-garden in the grounds...brilliant-coloured, geometrically-shaped beds, converging to a sun-dial in the midst. (66)

Natural order, albeit carefully fashioned and tended by the Hamley garden staff, is explicitly part of the tasteful environment of the Hall. Roger Hamley, who the reader

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[19] Frances Sheridan, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, ed. by Patricia Koster and Jean Coates Cleary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.292.

first meets emerging from the 'meadows...ponds and ditches' to comfort Molly, demonstrates from the outset of the novel a sensitivity and carefulness which is presented as one with the timeless environment of the Hall and its countryside: 'He was,' Gaskell emphasises, 'so great a lover of nature that, without any thought, but habitually, he always avoided treading unnecessarily on any plant' (117). In the comparison of the Hamley and Gibson households, Gaskell presents not only the disturbing difficulty of defining the self in the increasingly ill-defined divisions between the social classes, and the moral ambivalence underpinning notions of female display, but also an awareness that display was linked to discussions reverberating far beyond the home.
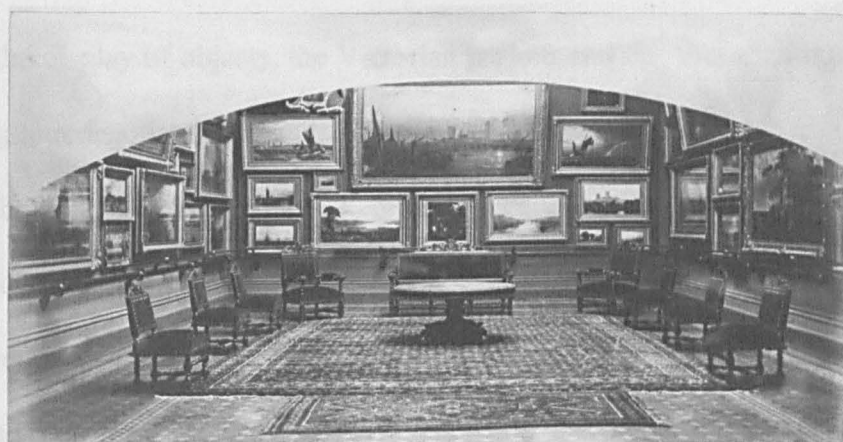
This increasingly sophisticated understanding of the issues around domestic display was deeply rooted in the presentation of decorative art objects in the emerging regional museums. As Thad Logan has pointed out in *The Victorian Parlour*, the middle-class nineteenth-century home was 'a privileged, cultural space...in which material things simultaneously asserted and concealed a relation to the marketplace...a site of collection and display comparable to the museum'.[20] Yet the relationship between display in the home and in the museum was more complex and reciprocal than Logan here suggests. It was not simply that the parlour became a mini-museum; early museums, too, were drawing influences from and defining themselves alongside domestic spaces. Many of the public museums of the 1860s and '70s evolved from genteel private house museums which had presented artworks, sculpture and objects in a domestic setting as an example of both aesthetic achievement and the kind of good taste to which the middle classes could aspire.

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[20] Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, p.xiii

These were sober, traditional and intrinsically family spaces, much more like Hamley Hall than Mrs Gibson's drawing-room. Just as domestic interiors were increasingly looking to the developing public museums for inspiration and validation, so at the same time, museums were emerging from these private quarters into new public spaces, retaining some influences of the domestic display of their roots but necessarily also beginning to reinvent private objects for a public audience. Museums were experimenting not only with what could be chosen for collection and exhibition but also the ways in which the objects were displayed. What was becoming established was a complicated exchange of glances between the private and public curators, an entangled vocabulary of display which derived from, and influenced, both the home and the museum.

The domestic spaces the museums were attempting to embody were clearly not the cluttered, middle-class spaces of Mrs Gibson's suspect drawing room (which rather evoked the commercial spirit of the retailer) but the more measured and expansive environments of the wealthy classes. Many regional galleries recalled the scale and design of noble, even royal, spaces. The display of things, it was implied, was an integral part of the idealised, unimpeachable family life which the upper classes were perceived to inhabit. As these photographs of Nottingham's Long Gallery (1878) show, however, while gallery spaces often retained domestic elements, they were simultaneously re-presented within the professional context of the museum's public role:

the man at work and, as Eastlake's *Hints* demonstrated, the man at work believed he was better placed to understand and influence the mechanics of display. The museums

Figs 2 & 3: The Long Gallery, Nottingham, 1878. The Castle Museum, Nottingham.

Domestic touches - rugs, furniture, pot plants - remained, but the overall tone of the spaces was more severe, more ordered and inevitably more impersonal than most homes.

One of the distinct differences between the domestic and the museum environment was the gender of those entrusted with its care. The glances exchanged between the private and public curator were glances between the woman at home and

the man at work and, as Eastlake's *Hints* demonstrated, the man at work believed he was better placed to understand and influence the mechanics of display. The museums were dissociating themselves from the commercial market aimed at the female shopper and responsible for Mrs Gibson's *objets d'art* and instead attempting to relocate objects within an objective framework which was independent of the vagaries of fashion. The emphasis on demonstrating the aesthetic and educational values of objects changed the ways in which they were shown, away from an emphasis on domestic jumble and towards a more systematic, didactic arrangement; away from the familial associated with the female and towards the professional associated with the male. From their common roots of showing the self to visitors through the display of objects, the Victorian parlour and the Victorian museum were beginning to renegotiate their mutual boundaries, and move apart.

The emerging museums lacked many precedents other than the domestic for showing decorative art objects. With the museums' emphasis on public virtue and the demonstration of aesthetic and manufacturing principles, however, the curators began to look to models of display which shared similar messages rather than similar objects. The museum could be defined against domestic spaces not by what it displayed but by why it displayed it: while in the home the display of decorative pieces was about showing off, in the public museum it became about demonstrating agreed 'truths'. Museums moved towards enshrining and encouraging the quiet, authoritative qualities of Roger Hamley, suggestive of established, verifiable truths and natural order, rather than promoting the jumbled glitz of the female drawing room. Just as Molly demonstrates her superior judgment and sensitivity by choosing Roger (above, for example, the showy Preston), so the museum visitor could

demonstrate her good sense by learning to appreciate the continuum of which the museum object was a part.

As has been explored in chapter one, most cities had a much longer history of presenting natural history and scientific collections to the public than of trying to display decorative objects. It is then not surprising that many of the early displays of decorative things drew heavily on scientific habits and traditions of display. Decorative objects were arranged to classify and demonstrate, to act as entries in the encyclopaedia of knowledge which the museum represented. Rarely presented alongside paintings, in exhibitions which emphasised only aesthetic qualities and the provenance of ownership, they were instead displayed as part of a linear progress of manufacturing development and social evolution, analogous with the hierarchical, educative display of natural history which elucidated arguments on man's position in the universe. Piece by piece, the accumulation of things for public view promised to reveal the facts about wholesome manufacture and reinforce principles of good taste. Modern objects were displayed alongside older pieces so as to reinforce a clear context invoking a continuum of development and making direct links with the past. 'There was some need', explained a catalogue setting out the principles for the first public exhibition at Nottingham's municipal museum in 1878, 'for arousing in the manufacturer and the worker an interest in the history and meaning of their productions by bringing them into contact with fine examples of the past'.[21] Nor was this interpretation dependent on accompanying catalogues or labels. The arrangement of the exhibition itself was seen to be powerful enough to convey the message. In

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[21] Catalogue, City of Nottingham Art Gallery, Jubilee Exhibition 1878-1928 (Nottingham: Derry & Sons, 1928), p.4.

1867 Henry Cole emphasised a vision of the South Kensington Museum based on this systematic, elucidatory display:

> other collections may attract the learned to explore them, but these will be arranged so clearly that they may woo the ignorant to examine them...although ample catalogues and guides are prepared and are preparing, it will not be necessary to the poor man to buy one, to understand what he is looking at.[22]

The clear arrangement of things was all important in his campaign to 'woo' the masses. Information alone would not do: the exhibition had to imbue things with due significance so that people would move beyond the dilettante's tendency to 'explore' to the more scientific process of 'examination'.

The South Kensington Museum's policy of loaning exhibitions of objects to emerging regional museums was to play an important role in disseminating these principles. The first of these loans was to Nottingham in 1872 for twelve months, where it was seen as 'only the beginning of what is intended to be a permanent local museum'.[23] In the spirit of Henry Cole's campaign, the local press emphasised to the public that this was not to be a 'harum-scarum collection' but had a serious intention, 'to show the application of fine art to industry'.[24] To house the loan, the town created the 'Midland Counties Museum of Science and Art' which by the end of the 1870s had become settled in its permanent home of the castle, and had dropped the 'Science' from its title. In the introduction to the catalogue produced on the opening of the Museum in 1878 (which sold out of its first edition of 5000 copies within a week in July 1878), the museum's committees emphasised again that the displays

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[22] Henry Cole, speech 16th November 1867, published in, H. Cole, *Fifty Years of Published Work* (London: George Bell, 1884), p.293.
[23] *Express and Review*, 14 May 1872, n.p.
[24] *Nottingham Daily Guardian*, 21 May 1872, p.9.

had municipal truths to demonstrate:

> It is believed that this is the first time that a Municipal Corporation has committed itself to work of this character...[it is displaying] enterprises of this description that the national taste may be elevated and the social and moral tone of the people improved.[25]

The Municipal Corporation was creating a role for itself based not solely on manufacturing enterprise but also upon 'enterprises' of display and the less tangible elevation of 'the social and moral tone of the people'. It was the unshakable confidence in progress which was on show, and the growing sense of the city as educator and guide to its citizens.

Although no illustrations of the early Nottingham exhibitions appear to exist, a glance at the catalogues highlights the legacy of the scientific and natural history exhibition (despite Nottingham dropping explicit reference to science from its title). In 1840, an exhibition of 'Objects illustrative of the Fine Arts, Natural History, Philosophy, Machinery, Manufactures, Antiquities etc. in the Exchange Rooms, Nottingham' had acted as the first public precursor to the 1872 loan exhibition and the founding of the Museum. In its 'Large Room' the majority of things on display were what would now be described as decorative arts but would then have been associated with the domestic interior: a pair of china jars and a pair of alabaster vases, an amber casket, a biscuit china vase, a vase and pedestal, a silver filigree vase. Yet it was difficult to assign value to these objects which were not commonly displayed in a museum setting and, as if to validate their inclusion and to allot them a role in a wider context, they were shown side by side with a dazzling array of more

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[25] *Official Catalogue of the Pictures and Objects in the Midland Counties Art Museum, The Castle, Nottingham,* ed. by J. P. Briscoe (Nottingham: Forman and Sons, 1878), p.5. Archives of Nottingham Castle Galleries and Museums.

traditional objects for display. Natural history, for example, was represented by two cases of British Birds and a case of foreign birds; a Nautilus Shell and numerous other 'beautiful' shells; 'Feathers of Birds and Scales of Fishes and Insects;' a 'specimen of vegetable anatomy' and the 'skeleton of a thorn apple'. In addition, there were numerous bronze and marble sculptures to invoke the long traditions of exhibiting fine art, including 'The Graces,' 'Bacchus' and 'Ariadne' in terra cotta and Canova's 'Dancing Figure' as well as a 'beautiful' bronze of 'Napolean Planning the Battle of Marengo' on loan from Lord Rancliffe and two examples of the 'Dying Gladiator'.[26]

The 1872 catalogue from the South Kensington loan exhibition shows this pattern continuing. Although thirty-eight oil paintings and one sculpture were on show, as well as some watercolours, most objects were metalwork, earthenware and porcelain, glass, enamel or lace and drawings of lace associated with the town's major industry. The display opened with a glass case showing silver and plate tableware: a butter-cooler, flagon, mustard pot, salver, salt-cellar and tea pot.[27] The displays were designed to take fine examples of familiar objects and, presented in the rarefied atmosphere of the new museum, in large glass display cases in the manner of natural history specimens, demonstrate through them an argument to prove the theories of good taste. The language of the catalogue re-emphasised this desire to elucidate principles and engage with scientific display:

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[26] *Catalogue of the Objects illustrative of the Fine Arts, Natural History, Philosophy, Machinery, Manufactures, Antiquities etc in the Exchange Rooms, Nottingham* (Nottingham: J Howitt, 1840). Archive of Nottingham Castle Galleries and Museums, 32.1.

[27] *Catalogue of the Collection of Objects selected from the Museum at South Kensington to be contributed on loan for twelve months (until June 1873) to The Midland Counties Museum of Science and Art, Nottingham* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1872). Archive of Nottingham Castle Galleries and Museums, 665.1.

> A small but suggestive collection has been contributed of examples of Italian, Spanish and Flemish pottery, to which is added a few choice specimens of Venetian glass...Rarity is not the only claim to consideration in these objects, and some of them are rare and precious, not in mere money value but as examples of what could be done in the past, and as evidence of what may be done again. Rare examples are not necessarily beautiful examples, and although rarity may attract the connoisseur and gratify his pride of possession, yet it should ever be for its beauty, its suggestiveness and the lessons to be learnt by its study that an object should be placed in an Educational Museum.[28]

While the exhibition organisers emphasised the importance of beauty, rather than just rarity, in the objects on display, still the catalogue highlights 'choice specimens' which offer 'examples' and 'evidence' of 'lessons to be learnt' through study. It is through the language and habits of scientific display that the decorative art collection is largely presented.

Nottingham's emphasis on defining itself as an 'Educational Museum' did little to deter, and perhaps actively encouraged, visitors. Over 2,500 people a week visited the loan exhibition, amounting to a total of over 760,000. As Barbara Black notes, the evolution from private house to public museum which was taking place at this time was matched by the evolution of museum visiting to a 'national past-time'. She explores, as other museum critics have done, the notion that this popularity allowed the museum to act as 'an agent of decorum, a dispenser of etiquette' which constructed 'a community, or collectivity, of the tasteful'.[29] Certainly, press articles of the period emphasised the importance of creating and maintaining an agreed good taste based on metropolitan chic. In the 'Progress of Taste' as early as 1862, the *London Review* praised 'the improvement in our own taste during the last eleven

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[28] Ibid, vii
[29] Black, *On Exhibit,* p.105. See also, for example, Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* for a discussion of museums as models for social ordering.

years' and held out 'much hope' in this improvement continuing. The basis for such optimism was that the improvement in taste had 'not only been steady, but has also shown no indications of the effect of local influences'.[30] The *London Review* went on to suggest that it was 'the extent of the empire and the moving habits of the educated classes' which had so conveniently 'extinguished' any remnants of unorthodoxy, but initiatives like the loan exhibition in Nottingham inevitably also acted to homogenise opinion by presenting displays from London institutions as the benchmark of progress. The Nottingham Museum committees definitely seemed to regard their activity as valuable because it created a consensus around taste. The exhibitions preliminary to the permanent museum had been valued as examples of the 'vast and wonderful development of man's intellectual powers'.[31] By 1872, however, the emphasis had shifted from wonder to instruction, and the Museum catalogue was explaining that 'Well-regulated museums are the only means by which the education and refinement of the great mass...can be effected in a satisfactory manner'.[32] By 1878, as we have seen, the 'Municipal Corporation' felt able confidently to assert that it was only in 'enterprises of this character that the national taste may be elevated and the social and moral tone of the people improved'.[33]

As Carla Yanni points out in her discussion of science museums, however, it can be misleading to take this kind of municipal confidence at face value. Despite the museum's best attempts to create what Yanni terms a 'master narrative of power' based on homogenised authoritative narratives of 'national taste' evidenced through

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[30] *The London Review of Politics, Society, Literature, Art and Science*, 29 (November 1862), p.474.
[31] Introduction, *Catalogue of the Objects illustrative of the Fine Arts, Natural History, Philosophy, Machinery, Manufactures, Antiquities etc in the Exchange Rooms, Nottingham*, n.p.
[32] *Catalogue of the Collection of Objects selected from the Museum at South Kensington*, p.v
[33] *Official Catalogue of the Pictures and Objects in the Midland Counties Art Museum*, p.5.

display, what was actually on offer was, she suggests, 'only an illusion of unity', when, in fact, displays had the potential to give different messages to different visitors.[34] Yanni's reading of a more problematised process of display seems a particularly fruitful way of considering decorative art objects, in particular, since they were new to the canon of museum exhibition. Another look at the catalogue for Nottingham's 1872 exhibition, for example, highlights the subtle diversity of impulses and intentions underpinning the unifying rhetoric about educating and elevating public taste. Unlike in the 1840 catalogue, the decorative art pieces in the exhibition were now clearly marked 'modern' and the place and price of purchase given. Alongside several (mostly foreign) entries, to make the point more clearly, is a curatorial note that the piece was 'bought as an example of cheapness of manufacture'.[35] The range of information provided - setting the pragmatism of price alongside the extravagance of highly elaborate and refined workmanship - allowed the museum visitor to pick and choose which, if any, aspects of the 'master narrative' to read, depending on his interests. The art student could study and learn to copy the finer points, for example, of a highly-decorated French incense burner 'which is supported on a stand with four tigers' heads as feet; arabesque decoration of oriental character'; the domestic collector could track down a silver salver to its makers, Gough and Co. of Birmingham, and consider whether six pounds and six shillings was a reasonable price to pay for it; and the curious manufacturer could compare his

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[34] Carla Yanni, *Nature's Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p.8.
[35] See, for example, the entries for the three modern French imitation bronze clocks on display in metalwork room number one; *Catalogue of the Collection of Objects selected from the Museum at South Kensington*, p.2. Archive of Nottingham Castle Galleries and Museums, 665.2.

range and prices to those of competitors from abroad.[36]

What the catalogue entries make clear is that, for modern decorative objects in particular, the museum's preoccupation with taste was inextricably linked to a broader anxiety about manufacturing costs and consumer prices. The narrative presented in the 1872 Nottingham exhibition was not, despite the assertions of the curators, a straightforward and uniquely authoritative presentation of objects for 'the education and refinement of the great mass,' but also an airing of this anxiety and a rallying call to the public to raise manufacturing standards and buy British.[37] Unlike displays of Old Masters, these exhibitions were openly aimed at encouraging visitors into new ways of seeing and making objects. The displays, rather than simply existing as instruments for asserting conservative control, were explicitly about novelty and progress, and were part of a growing network to support industrial and social change. This process necessarily depended on the intelligent visitor not just absorbing good taste in some kind of mysterious symbiotic procedure but, more actively and less predictably, interrogating the objects, the information about them and the ways in which they were displayed.

This discursive relationship between the museum display and its visitors highlighted the fact that the exhibition, like other visual models of the period, was subject to challenge; the shifting, ambiguous nuances of display were at the heart of the experience for the museum visitor. At a time when, as I have discussed in an earlier chapter, the Victorians were beginning to contest the adequacy of a number of visual practices, showing up the limitations of the eye through the invention of

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[36] ibid., p.3
[37] ibid., p.v

technical devices for more exact or detailed seeing, and developing a fluid and inquisitive understanding of the act of vision, the museum visit too - founded so strongly on processes of viewing - was inevitably subject to change and contention. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that although the messages about good taste which were being proposed in museums across the country, by reformers like Eastlake and Henry Cole and in the quiet fictional drawing rooms created by writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, were often being understood by consumers, they were not necessarily being adopted. The wholesale acceptance of a uniform, authoritative taste was often rejected in favour of the multiple messages of the object. Despite the continual attempts by reformers to shape the sense of public discernment, and to establish a confident irrefutable opinion on what should be displayed and how it should be presented, the public repeatedly resisted the policing of taste. This resistance was especially visible in the home. As Thad Logan points out, by the 1880s, despite years of education and advice, domestic clutter had actually increased. The reformed sense of display, based on process and objectivity, which male museum curators were continually proposing as proper and correct was being rejected by the largely female body of home-makers in favour of a populist aesthetic, which demonstrated an unabated infatuation with show and 'articulated a pleasure and delight in the things of this world, and a fascination with the products of the social body'.[38] The interaction between the domestic and the professional curator was becoming increasingly ambiguous and the distance between their two modes of display increasingly evident.

The determination of Victorian women to clutter their parlours in the face of

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[38] Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, p.104.

male anxieties and rule making, was in part a response to the increasingly sophisticated temptations being offered by commercial suppliers. As Rachel Bowlby, and others, have explored, the second half of the nineteenth century saw the growth of shopping as a leisure activity, the rise of advertising and the 'invention of new desires' with which to entice the consumer.[39] The male producer was increasingly turning his attention to the female shopper. While some men were urging an approved canon of good taste based on careful and thoughtful accumulation of things, others were holding out the lure of a much more gaudy show which relied on a rich confusion of objects and which could be satisfied by determined shopping. In direct opposition to the museums and the taste 'experts' were the retailers and advertisers, attempting to lure the unwitting, usually female, buyer into making ever more purchases.

In such a contradictory environment, it is no surprise that the question of taste remained so thorny and public judgment so unpredictable. The multiple layers of possible display, the nuances of the range of potential choices between the extravagant and the austere, were becoming increasingly evident. In addition, people were being given more opportunities to scrutinise the meanings inherent in these choices. The presentation of fictional drawing rooms allowed readers to define and refine their own sense of style; the museum visit created a locus for the visitor to compare himself to others through the objects on exhibition. The exercising of taste through the display of things was growing ever more complex and bound ever more resolutely to the display of the self.

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[39] Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York: Menthuen, 1985), p.2.

4.   Displaying the Self:
The Fictional Object Concealed and Revealed.

The first and last, and the closest trial question to any living creature is "What do you like?" Tell me what you like, and I'll tell you what you are...what we like determines what we are, and is the sign of what we are.[1]

The indefatigable desire to display things, in the home and beyond, was, as we have seen, accompanied during the second half of the nineteenth century by a growing understanding that the tastes revealed through display were loaded with private and public meanings. In 1866, Ruskin was already confidently asserting that 'what we like determines who we are', so reinforcing the impression that the exercise of personal taste was bound to fundamental issues of selfhood. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this growing realisation that 'what you are' could be read by others simply by taking account of 'what you like', created an ambiguity about the moral and social implications of display which was not easily resolved. Such ambiguity was inevitably reflected in, and examined by, the fiction of the period which explored the ways in which layers of identity could be constructed through the manipulation of 'the sign[s] of what we are'.

At the beginning of *Hard Times* in 1854 Dickens takes up the issue of display, particularly as demonstrated in the home, and appears to satirise the misplaced enthusiasm of the design reformers. Some critics have even identified Henry Cole with the zealous Gradgrind who 'nods his approbation' when a

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[1] John Ruskin, 'Crown of Wild Olive', in *Works,* 18, p.346.

'government officer' visits the school and quizzes the children (7).[2] While this appears to me perhaps a step too far, it is certainly clear that the attempt by the government officer to reduce the complexities of taste to a statement of fact, is held up by Dickens for ridicule:

> "Very well," said this gentleman, briskly smiling, and folding his arms. "That's a horse. Now, let me ask you, girls and boys, Would you paper a room with representations of horses?"
> After a pause, one half of the children said in chorus, "Yes, sir!"...
> "Of course, No," said the gentleman, with an indignant look at the wrong half. "Why, then, you are not to see anywhere, what you don't see in fact; you are not to have anywhere, what you don't have in fact. What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact...You must use...for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste." (7-8)

For the government officer, taste is directly linked to the process and outcome of education: the children are learning simultaneously how to use mathematical figures and how they should decorate their houses. It is interesting, then, that in Sissy Jupe, Dickens presents a character who reveals her humanity partly through resistance to this homogenising, reductive taste. Sissy's association with the colourful world of fancy rather than the stark contrasts of manufacturing efficiency, her 'imaginative graces and delights, without which the...sturdiest physical manhood will be morally stark death' (259), is complemented by a refusal to adopt the lessons of the reformers. Individual taste is, Dickens implies, as complicated and potentially wholesome as the individual imagination, and Sissy's ability to retain her personal and moral priorities in the face of opposition is linked to her capacity to withstand the onslaught of the taste reformers. The suspicion that the nuances of display can be reduced to 'only another name for fact...susceptible of proof and demonstration',

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[2] See, for example, Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, p.103.

which Dickens here articulates, is founded not so much on a wariness of the inherent nature of display itself, but rather of the politics of relocating the principles of tasteful display from the domestic hearth to the impersonal, rule-governed sphere of 'mathematical figures'.

Ten years later, with *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), Dickens articulates more extensively the ambiguity associated with display. His exploration of the nature of the 'bad taste' demonstrated by the Podsnap and Lammle households suggests that a failure of judgement in buying and displaying objects may reveal a more serious failure of domestic integrity. It is not now the comic posturing of the reformers which is the focus of Dickens's attention, but instead the moral implications of displaying the popular domestic decorative objects being acquired by the aspiring Victorian middle classes. Visual display has become strange, shifting and iniquitous. Dickens expands on the 'nouns that gave evidence of wealth' in Gaskell's *North and South* (170), and presents personified objects which physically proclaim affluence in truculent exchanges. Rather than boost the status of their households, however, these objects act to subvert their owner's social and moral standing:

> Everything was made to look as heavy as it could, and to take up as much room as possible. Everything said boastfully, "Here you have as much of me in my ugliness as if I were only lead; but I am so many ounces of precious metal worth so much an ounce;- wouldn't you like to melt me down?" A corpulent straggling epergne, blotched all over as if it had broken out in an eruption rather than been ornamented, delivered this address from an unsightly silver platform with four staring heads, each head obtrusively carrying a big silver ring in each of its ears, conveyed the sentiment up and down the table, and handed it on to the pot-bellied silver salt-cellars. All the big silver spoons and forks widened the mouths of the company expressly for the purpose of thrusting the sentiment down their throats with every morsel they ate. (117)

The language is violent and diseased: objects are 'corpulent' or 'blotched'; the message 'thrust' down the throats of the diners. The quiet models of good taste

which, in the previous chapter, we saw proposed by the emerging museum authorities and by novelists like Elizabeth Gaskell, are here overwhelmed by a loud (both visually and aurally) display of plate valued entirely for its financial worth. The confident attachment to popular display is here associated with a degraded domestic life articulated by outstandingly ugly tableware. In a disturbing elision, not only is the plate given human characteristics but the 'extravagant forms' of the Podsnaps and their guests become intrinsically entangled with the objects on display: 'The majority of the guests were like the plate, and included several heavy articles weighing ever so much' (117). It is perhaps significant that Charles Eastlake was to save some of his boldest criticism for the 'debased design' of plate:

> In the whole range of art-manufacture there are no more deplorable examples of taste than the silver side-dishes, soup-tureens, cruet-stands, salvers and candlesticks of the nineteenth century. The most extravagant forms are enriched with ornament, which is either a caricature of Renaissance detail, or simply feeble representations of natural form. (286)

The blurring of the boundaries in Dickens's text between person and thing suggests not only the subsuming of the wealthy by their wealth, but also that the outward evidence of 'deplorable' taste indicates an internal corruption filling the hiatus left behind by such a loss of identity.

This motif of display as moral indicator is not, in *Our Mutual Friend*, confined to the households of the newly rich. The impoverished Mortimer Lightwood, growing in moral stature as he pursues his defence of Lizzie Hexam's interests, has modest and noticeably bare living quarters. His colleague and friend Eugene Wrayburn goes so far as to identify their simple, domestic objects with a moral lifestyle:

> "See", said Eugene, "miniature flour barrel, rolling-pin, spice-box, shelf of brown jars, chopping board, coffee-mill, dresser elegantly furnished with

crockery, saucepans and pans, roasting-jack, a charming kettle, an armoury of dish-covers. The moral influence of these objects, in forming the domestic virtues, may have an immense influence upon me..." (245)

Like the Podsnap plate, these objects remain unused, acting only as decoration, but here the dresser is 'elegantly furnished,' the kettle 'charming', and while Mortimer recognises that 'nothing will ever be cooked' in the neat little kitchen, it is the effect of the objects upon their owners which is significant: "'My dear, dear Mortimer," returned his friend..."how often have I pointed out to you that it's the moral influence is the important thing?'" (245). The display of objects becomes a way of fortifying the self in 'domestic virtues', and holds out the promise of a more complete life beyond the bachelor indolence of the current household. Display allays anxieties – it makes a link with the secure, highly-visible presence of institutions like museums and the structured moral universe they appear to inhabit. It is then perhaps significant, that Lightwood draws on an analogy with museums as he becomes more entangled in professional anxieties and the daunting, unfamiliar processes of Boot the detective. Lightwood describes his only client, Mr Boffin, as 'a natural curiosity which forms the sole ornament of my professional museum' (356). His curatorship of Mr Boffin evokes not only curiosity but also professional pride: 'as I never had another client, and in all likelihood never shall have, I am rather proud of him' (356). Lightwood's first step on the legal ladder, his growing professional and personal experience and his increasingly ethical role in the novel's plot are signalled by his choice of the firm values inherent in the museum metaphor.

The complex moral implications of display which Dickens begins to explore in *Our Mutual Friend* were becoming increasingly evident in social attitudes in the second half of the nineteenth century and evidenced by manufacturers' carefully-

constructed wooing of consumers. The climate of austere, even puritanical, display being established by some of the public museums, and echoed by the more exclusive private galleries, reinforced the impression that unstructured, exuberant display indicated at best moral turpitude and, at worst, moral disintegration. The emergence of the early Aesthetic Movement, for example, began to associate personal display with decadence and the challenging of accepted sexual mores. 'The root of all evil,' proclaimed an article in the *Magazine of Art* in 1879, 'is the innate and seemingly irrepressible passion for display...the love of show...leads us astray from the simplicity and modesty that are at the bottom of all good work'.[3]

During the 1870s and 1880s, shops and manufacturers began to juggle with the paradox that people wanted more and more things for their home, while also wanting to align themselves with the superior education, taste and morality suggested by careful and discreet display. Several potteries, for example, opened 'art' studios which allowed them to sell one-off 'museum' pieces for the more refined home: Mintons established Art-Pottery Studios in 1871 in South Kensington, near the museum, selling work produced by the factory in Stoke but individually decorated by various artists in order to appeal to a more exclusive market. By encouraging a certain individualism within the commercial climate, manufacturers could also encourage the impression that the buying of their objects was inspired by more worthwhile impulses than simply the need to own and display - these more exclusive lines were more easily linked to notions of artistic merit and educational advancement. So, for example, Howell & James, who by the 1860s and 1870s were

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[3] Lewis F. Day, 'Decorative Art I: Its Importance and its Omnipresence – Taste, Novelty, Fashion, Dress, Jewellery, etc.', *Magazine of Art*, 2 (1879), 103-7 (p.104).

focussing on the production and retailing of 'Art Manufactures', organised competitions open to amateurs who could hand-paint their porcelain. *Art Journal* praised the initiative because it 'directed the attention of ladies to an employment at once pleasant and remunerative, giving, or rather extending occupation for women – a social requirement universally admitted'.[4] The production, display and sale of objects became coupled with 'employment' and with the onerous task of keeping women productively and modestly occupied in the home. It could be ordered and controlled, embedded in the ongoing education of the taste of consumers, particularly female consumers.

Perhaps most influential of all in negotiating the ethical nuances of display was the growing Arts and Crafts Movement which began to locate the making and showing of objects in a distinctly moral framework bound to the encouragement of artisan craftsmanship and the rediscovery of medieval ideals of community and wholesome living. With William Morris and his colleagues, social change was becoming associated with objects for display in the home and design reform with a moral imperative.[5] By making private choices of objects for domestic consumption, those buying Arts and Crafts pieces could also be reassured about the nature of the public statement visitors might read through those pieces: what they were displaying was a moral and social conscience rather than a Podsnap-like preoccupation with wealth and social rootlessness. The middle classes were seduced by objects like the

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[4] *Art Journal,* 17, (September 1878), p. 86. For a more detailed discussion of Art Pottery during the period, see for example, Gillian Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: A Study of its Sources, Ideals, and Influence on Design Theory* (London: Studio Vista, 1971).

[5] Several critics suggest that the Arts and Crafts Movement proper does not get underway until the 1880s. (See, for example, Peter Stansky, *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s and the Arts and Crafts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985)). During the 1870s, however, Morris & Co. had perhaps its most creative and successful decade, and after exhibiting at the 1862 International Exhibition, was becoming commercially more influential and its objects increasingly visible.

Sussex Chair which Fiona MacCarthy, in her biography of Morris, identifies as a 'cult object'. It embodied traditional values and country-house heritage and, in contrast to the gratuitous display of the newly rich in the cities, was associated with impeccable taste. Morris's business manager, Warrington Taylor, was able to describe the best seller as: 'essentially gentlemanly with a total absence of ex-tallow chandler vulgarity – it possesses poetry of simplicity'.[6]

Yet the scope of the Arts and Crafts Movement suggested an ambiguity of which some of its founders were acutely aware. It was not solely about understatement and quiet refinement: many of its pieces embraced the enjoyment of display for its own sake. Walter Crane (1845-1915), artist and illustrator and first president of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society which he helped to establish in 1888, reviewed the influence of the Movement on the later decades of the nineteenth century in language which articulated this duality:

> The great advantage of the Morrisian method is that it lends itself to either simplicity or splendour. You might be almost plain enough to please Thoreau, with a rush-bottomed chair, piece of matting, and oaken trestle table; or you might have gold and lustre...gleaming from the side-board, and jewelled light in your windows, and walls hung with rich arras tapestry.[7]

Few people, outside Morris's own close circle, followed the Arts and Crafts ideal exclusively; most, as Crane suggests, combined elements of it with their own existing tastes for decoration. But the moral framework implied by the Movement allowed consumers to brush away some of the common ambivalence about objects and display, conciliating the desire to own and show with the need to present a conscientiously high-minded social identity. It is a habit of display noted by George

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[6] Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber, 1994), p.209.
[7] Walter Crane, 'The English Revival in Decorative Art', in *William Morris to Whistler* (London: Bell and Sons, 1911), p.54.

Eliot in *Middlemarch* when she describes the conspicuously-religious Mrs Bulstrode's 'naïve way of conciliating piety and worldliness, the nothingness of this life and the desirability of cut glass, the consciousness at once of filthy rags and the best damask' (302).

What emerges from this tension between the desire to show off one's things - and oneself through one's things - and the recognition that too overt a display could be considered morally suspect, is a continual interchange between showing and hiding. To some extent, this dynamic is bound to the object as an indicator of wealth, and the growing tension between the desire to keep one's property (particularly one's home and wife) private while exhibiting evidence of capital. Whereas during the eighteenth century, the capitalist spirit was frequently seen to be a positive passion which could keep in check other more unruly, and immoral, passions, and act as a counterweight to socially undesirable behaviour, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the attitude towards conspicuous consumption was much more ambivalent.[8] The activities of creating wealth had acquired an overtone of coarseness and taint, as evidenced by the Podsnap plate. The machinations of commercial enterprise needed, visibly at least, to be separated from the higher moral priorities of family, and social or religious responsibility. If, as critics such as Nancy Armstrong and Mary Poovey have argued, the home during this period became a refuge from the pressures of the market economy beyond, then the role of the domestic decorative object was a

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[8] For a discussion of eighteenth-century attitudes to entrepreneurial spirit, see, for example, J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History. Essays in Political Thought and History Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

sensitive one.[9] Distanced from commercial circulation by its domestic context, the display of the object within the home yet retained echoes of exhibitionism linked to the celebration of capital wealth. Like the museum, the home attempted to repress, at least temporarily, the object's role in the exchange economy and to use it instead as an indicator of the more intangible, and elevated, qualities of good taste and good breeding. Within this ambivalent context, the interaction between display and hiding can be read as an extension of the interaction between the private desire to have wealth, and the social pressure to suppress that desire in public. The display of things embraces the increasingly complicated social reception the exhibitor was attempting to navigate.

The economic dynamic between secrecy and disclosure which the objects inhabited can, however, also be seen in a broader context. In her discussion of investment culture in the period, Mary Poovey identifies the interaction between showing and hiding as 'a constitutive feature of a subjectivity divided against itself'.[10] In the ideological separation of home and work, of private and public, of making money and displaying social respectability, other critics too have identified a new understanding of the notion of identity which extends beyond financial imperatives. Michael Foucault, for example, in his discussion of the relationship between the visible and the invisible in *The Order of Things*, explores the emergence of a sense of identity which was focussed on the individual's body but was also subject to the control of social scrutiny. Later discussion has moved towards an

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[9] See, for example, Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
[10] Mary Poovey, 'Writing and Finance in Victorian England: Disclosure and Secrecy in the Culture of Investment', *Victorian Studies*, 45 (2002), 17-41 (p.20).

understanding of a complex selfhood which was separate from, and resistant to, the more public activities of the social body. In her examination of the growing influence of Victorian psychology, Sally Shuttleworth suggests that a more sophisticated understanding of the processes of the brain, and the fascination with the emerging sciences of phrenology and psychiatry, allowed a more complex understanding of the notion of identity. 'Selfhood,' she asserts:

> no longer resided in the open texture of social act and exchange, but within a new interior space, hidden from view, inaccessible even to the subject's own consciousness. Nor was the inner self necessarily legible from or immanent within outer sign.[11]

In this changing context of identity, the 'outer signs' provided by the display of objects are necessarily complicated. The massing of objects cannot necessarily be read simply as an indication of wealth or social respectability. With a more intricate understanding of the relationship between the visible and the invisible, a sense of self is suggested through half-glimpsed fragments: that which is not visible often becoming more significant than what is on show.

In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot explores this dynamic between the revealed and the concealed to comic effect, examining the display of Aunt Pullet's new bonnet and its social repercussions. For the St Ogg's community of Eliot's imagined past, the display of fashion is equally a display of spending power, and as such is to be taken seriously. 'It was really quite solemn', notes Eliot, emphasising the ceremonial nature of Aunt Pullet's procession to view the bonnet. The display itself takes place in 'a darkened room, in which the outer light, entering feebly, showed what looked like corpses of furniture in white shrouds' (89). Like a priest

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[11] Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Bronte and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.9.

revealing glimpses of a mysterious religious ritual, Aunt Pullet indulges her sham

reluctance to display her superior wealth by balancing elements of secrecy and

disclosure. The door key to the room in which the bonnet is stored is 'hidden among

layers of linen'; the shutter to the room is only 'half-opened', and the final moment

of revelation comes only after the removal of 'sheet after sheet of silver paper' (89).

Like the bonnet, Mrs Pullet's awareness of her superior social standing is only partly

submerged, and this opportunity for display is used to reinforce understood

hierarchies. When Aunt Pullet has finally revealed the object by which she wants to

be judged, she revels in the spectacle:

> 'You'd like to see it on, sister?' she said sadly. 'I'll open the shutter a bit
> further...'
> Mrs Pullet took off her cap, displaying the brown silk scalp with a jutting
> promontory of curls which was common to the more mature and judicious
> women of those times, and placing the bonnet on her head, turned slowly
> round, like a draper's lay-figure, that Mrs Tulliver might miss no point of
> view. (89-90)

The moment of display, however, is not one of unmixed triumph as Aunt Pullet,

dressed in her bonnet, is reduced to 'a draper's lay-figure'. Only when the bonnet has

been put away and 'they had all issued from the solemn chamber' does Eliot hint at

hidden meanings beyond the visibility of the object:

> Then, beginning to cry, she said, 'Sister, if you should never see that
> bonnet again till I'm dead and gone, you'll remember I showed it you this
> day.'...Maggie, looking on attentively, felt that there was some painful
> mystery about her aunt's bonnet which she was considered too young to
> understand. (91)

The constant association of Mrs Pullet's domestic ceremony with traditional

religious ritual not only lends it ironic weight, but also emphasises the power she

amasses through the possession of things and through the capacity to grant or

withhold display. In addition, the religious context hints at the fabric of guilt

associated with display and the potential moral judgment made by a society uncomfortable with demonstrations of excess. With the relationship between the inner self, and the visible indicators of the self displayed through things, becoming increasingly opaque and problematic, the continuing unease with the notion of display reflects an increasing understanding that the choice of things to exhibit may conceal as much as reveal identity.

In *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), published over a decade later than *The Mill on the Floss*, but equally located in an imagined historical tradition of 'personages, ways and customs which were common...in the villages of fifty or sixty years ago', Hardy also portrays an unease about the notion of display.[12] Dick's formidable prospective mother-in-law, Mrs Day, is introduced in a scene which appears to locate identity within the social reading of domestic objects, but the interaction between Mrs Day and her half-glimpsed things suggests a more tortured construction of selfhood, partly visible in domestic display and partly held back from the social gaze. So when Mrs Day first appears she is apparently fixated with things to the exclusion of any human interaction:

> Mrs Day appeared in view, looking fixedly at the table as she advanced towards it, with apparent obliviousness of any other human being than herself. In short, if the table had been the personage, and the persons the table, her glance would have been the most natural imaginable. (78-9)

It is a significant 'if'. In fact, Mrs Day's preoccupation with the inanimate marks her out not only as eccentric to the point of madness, but as unnaturally, and almost morbidly, sensitive to the meanings inherent in her display of things. Her first thought, before even greeting Dick, is that 'People will run away with a story

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[12] Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, ed. by Tim Dolin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p.2.

now...that Jane Day's tablecloths are as poor and ragged as any union beggars!' (78).
Objectifying herself in the third person, her sense of identity and of her place in the
undefined society of un-named 'People' appears to be founded on how she might be
interpreted through household things. Arriving unannounced, Dick upsets her
complex personal rules of display. He sees those things which should be hidden
away, while objects currently concealed in layers of wrapping should be out on show
for public admiration. Setting about rectifying the situation, Mrs Day swaps the
ragged tablecloth for 'an armful of new damask-linen'; snatches up the ordinary
'brown delf tea-things' to replace them with 'a brilliant silver teapot' and changes the
everyday cutlery for 'a box of bright steel horn-handled knives, silver-plated forks,
carver and all', each piece coated in a 'preservative oil' (79). As she does so,
however, Hardy emphasises the interchange between the hidden things, 'wrapped in
brown paper...with folds of tissue-paper underneath', and Mrs Day herself, who
'vanishes' upstairs in search of her better tableware, suggesting a residual invisible
selfhood which remains resistant to all the machinations of display. As she chooses
objects to display on her table, so Mrs Day chooses elements of herself to set before
her guest. Hardy's final commentary on the scene subverts a secure reading which
locates Mrs Day's identity simply within the presentation of tableware: shaking the
new cloth out of its folds she 'flounced', finally presiding 'with much composure'
over the finished table:

> It may cause some surprise to learn that, now her vagary was over, *she
> showed herself* to be an excellent person with much common sense and
> even a religious seriousness of tone...(80, my italics)

When the business of arranging her social identity through the arrangement of objects
is complete, what is revealed is a more complete womanhood belied by the 'vagary'

over external indicators. Herself aware, and fearful that, society may judge Jane Day by her tablecloths, she sets this social identity in place before beginning to lay out the more vulnerable 'excellent person' beneath. Only once she is content with how her visible objects will be read, does Mrs Day have the composure to present the honoured guest, along with the author and reader, with a more genuine display of the self, 'with much common sense and even a religious seriousness'.

Mrs Day's anxiety about what is on show, and the corresponding instinct to manage concealment, is a common fictional trope of the period, particularly seen in relationship to women, and involving objects, like Mrs Pullet's bonnet, which can be read as extensions of the female body. It is not only that display suggests folly, frippery and extravagance. More significantly, female display also suggests extravagant, even transgressive, sexuality. And yet more threatening still is female concealment, where appetite and desire may be hidden under a false show of virtue.

The discomfort is especially evident in a woman's relationship to her jewellery, and it is significant that it is in these relationships that the interchange between showing and hiding becomes perhaps most common in fiction. As an integral part of the social code of messages indicating wealth, the display of jewels had for generations offered a tangible indication of family fortune and position. In *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), for example, Mrs Merdle is introduced as little more than a figurine modelling the rewards of her husband's 'prodigious enterprise':

> It was not a bosom to repose upon, but it was a capital bosom to hang jewels upon. Mr Merdle wanted something to hang jewels upon, and he bought it for the purpose...Like all his other speculations, it was sound and successful. The jewels showed to the richest advantage. The bosom moving in Society with the jewels displayed upon it, attracted general admiration. Society approving, Mr Merdle was satisfied. (293)

Her selfhood is subsumed by her role as mannequin; her bejewelled Bosom presents

a 'stronghold' which remains impenetrable to personal inquiry (770). By the mid-nineteenth century, the intimate relationship between a woman and the glittering face of female desire potentially represented by her jewels was well understood and had become implicated in the growing unease about the expression of identity, and particularly female identity. While Mrs Merdle acts as an inscrutable display tool, other fictional characters suggest ways in which traditional meanings associated with the display of jewels in public could be subverted. As well as showing off capital or status, jewels hint at the deepest, potentially most dangerous, levels of female subjectivity, carefully hidden from the social gaze. As well as declaring wealth, they conceal desire.

This complex attitude to the display of the most personal of objects becomes a repeated trope in literature of the period, with jewellery becoming something to secrete rather than exhibit. So in *Bleak House* (1852-3), Ada hides her wedding ring not only because it acts as testimony to a disobedient and precipitous marriage but because it marks the beginning of an actively sexual relationship with Richard. Hetty hides her locket in *Adam Bede* (1859) because Adam 'disapproved of finery' and because it marks a new-found affluence dependent on her illicit liaison with Arthur Donnithorne (333). Gwendolen Harleth attempts to hide from her husband the necklace Deronda retrieves for her in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) because it is symbolic of their emerging mutual fascination. The desire for jewellery becomes entangled with, and evidence of, the desire for an intimate and potentially sinful relationship, and just as this weakness must be hidden from social judgment, so too must the jewels which suggest it.

In *Middlemarch,* Dorothea's relationship to her mother's jewels is particularly

complex and, coming in the first chapter of the novel, is influential in forming the reader's estimation of her character. Dorothea's reluctance to own, and certainly to display, any of the inherited jewels is aligned with her attempt to construct for herself a learned, esoteric, even puritanical, identity based on sensual simplicity and moral strength. Her desire is to be 'enamoured of intensity and greatness' rather than entangled with the implications of personal things (12). She judges the jewellery 'trinkets', suggestive only of frivolous entertainment: 'If I were to put on such a necklace as that, I should feel as if I had been pirouetting. The world would go round with me, and I should not know how to walk'. (13) But her subconscious understanding that the jewels have the potential to turn her world upside down, so that 'I should not know how to walk', hints at her fear of the latent self which could be released by the apparently simple act of wearing the jewels. Eventually, she is seduced by the beauty and glamour of an emerald which evokes a 'new current of feeling' (13). It is a feeling clearly linked to physical desire – 'it is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent' – and one that she can only countenance by linking it to the false security of religious belief: 'All the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colours by merging them in her mystic religious joy' (14). Her moral strength is, the reader suspects, little more than a near hypocritical denial of a sensuality which Eliot has established earlier in the chapter with her description of Dorothea's love of riding which 'she enjoyed in a pagan sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing' (11). So while Dorothea should 'in consistency' renounce all the jewels, she instead agrees to keep the amethyst ring and bracelet, which Celia pronounces 'very pretty – and quiet' (14). They become part of a half-submerged selfhood, Dorothea 'having them by her, to

feed her eye', while presenting in public an un-jewelled, carefully-constructed identity expressing 'well-bred economy' and 'religious feeling' (9, 10). When Celia asks her whether she will wear the jewels 'in company', Dorothea is scornful: "'Perhaps," she said, rather haughtily. "I cannot tell to what level I may sink"' (14). Her outburst, described by Eliot as an 'explosion', and Celia's sense that 'she had offended her sister' (36), suggest the inherent tensions in maintaining the privacy of an integral identity under the pressures of social and personal expectations. Aware that her acceptance of the jewels suggests a flaw in her presented self - and that through this flaw could ooze a whole range of sensual and unorthodox reactions - Dorothea conceals her amethysts.

This inherent tension in the display of jewellery had been a central feature of Eliot's earlier story, *The Lifted Veil* (1859). Bertha, the object of sexual rivalry between the narrator Latimer and his brother, celebrates her twentieth birthday at which, 'as she was very fond of ornaments', she is showered with gifts from the 'splendid jewellers' shops' in Vienna.[13] Latimer gives her an opal ring, the least expensive and striking of the gifts, and is offended when Bertha arrives at dinner that evening 'wearing conspicuously all the birthday presents except mine'. But what he takes to be a rejection of his gift based on its meagre financial worth and her disregard for him, is apparently proved wrong when he challenges Bertha the next morning and she offers him a moment of personal, and highly-sexualised, display:

> "Do I despise it?" she answered, taking hold of a delicate gold chain which she always wore round her neck and drawing out the end from her bosom with my ring hanging to it; "it hurts me a little, I can tell you," she said, with her usual dubious smile, "to wear it in that secret place; and

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[13] George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil* (London: Virago, 1985), p.25. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

since your poetical nature is so stupid as to prefer a more public position, I shall not endure the pain any longer." (25)

Latimer's jewel is hidden not because it has little meaning but because Bertha wants to invest it with as much meaning as possible. Her seduction of Latimer is built upon an understanding of the power of concealment and revelation, and an awareness that Latimer will regard her hiding of the necklace as an indicator also of hidden feelings and desires. The jewel acquires emotional and sexual significance by being tucked away 'in that secret place' and represents a supposed understanding between them while it remains hidden. Once revealed for public display such significance is diminished, or even lost. Renouncing the 'pain' of her apparent feelings for Latimer, Bertha reduces the ring to a mere ornament: 'She took off the ring from the chain and put it on her finger, smiling still' (25-6).

While Bertha plays upon Latimer's desire to read her inner self in her wearing of the jewel, however, Eliot highlights the dubious nature of such a display. Bertha's concealment of the jewel does not conceal a romantic passion for the innocent Latimer, but rather her complex, scheming machinations and a barely suppressed sexual immorality. Paradoxically, her identity as a woman is revealed to the reader while it is further obscured to Latimer through her concealment of his ring. Subjectivity, Eliot suggests, can no longer be reliably presented by the mechanics of display, since the nature of display itself can be manipulated to create a credible, but mistaken, understanding of an individual's motives and desires. Latimer chooses the opal, in preference to 'some other opaque, unresponsive stone', because 'it seems to blush and turn pale as if it had a soul'. In contrast, Bertha is singularly unmoved by the whole episode, 'smiling still', with the self-possession of sexual confidence while it is the distressed Latimer whose 'blood rushed to my cheeks' when the ring is

revealed.

The complex interplay between concealment and display in which Bertha indulges here, and the illusive nature of public and private identities which it suggests, highlights the opportunities for the engineering of a perceived identity through the manipulation of display. For the unscrupulous, the ability to exploit these slippery potential meanings allows the concealment of the unpleasant, and even the criminal, providing that the public exhibition of the amiable and honest is sufficiently convincing. So, while Mr Merdle is alive, the show of wealth and status on his wife's bosom lends him an apparent unassailability, acting effectively to suppress any questions of background or character in the dazzle of display. His butler's first reaction on hearing of Merdle's death, however, is to announce his instant resignation with the knowing assertion that 'Mr Merdle never was a gentleman, and no ungentlemanly act on Mr Merdle's part would surprise me' (774). Within hours 'appalling whispers' begin publicly to circulate and Merdle's carefully constructed façade soon disintegrates to reveal, in place of the respectable banker, 'the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows' (777). Similarly in *Our Mutual Friend*, the glut of display in the Lammle household, actively hides both the lamentable financial situation and the sinister intentions of the inhabitants:

> The handsome fittings and furnishings of the house in Sackville Street were piled thick and high over the skeleton up-stairs, and if it ever whispered from under its load of upholstery, "Here I am in the closet!" it was to very few ears...(223)

While the Podnsap plate was eloquent and vocal, the Lammle's 'skeleton' is hardly voiced, smothered by the 'handsome fittings and furnishings', but it is a nonetheless active, and potentially destructive, presence, insistently attempting to reveal the genuine Lammle character from within the very heart of their display.

Even for those with less malevolent intentions the ability to contrive a perceived identity through the management of display is shown to be useful, and is explored by Elizabeth Gaskell in *Wives and Daughters,* a novel structured around the forming and disclosing of secrets. While Mrs Gibson's clutter of *'objets d'art'* marks her out as foolish and vulgar, it is in the disclosure of the secrets in the personal lives of her female characters that Gaskell, like Eliot, begins to tackle the shifting sense of self and the layering of elements of display which allows the creation of a series of public identities to protect a more closely-guarded private one. The more worldly-wise the character, the more adept they are at manipulating these identities. Like her mother, Cynthia Kirkpatrick is alive to the nuances and significance of display. As a girl, she is compelled to borrow twenty pounds from Preston – and so bind herself to him in an awkward situation of indebtedness – in order to buy suitable outfits for joining a house party at her richer friends, the Donaldsons. She wants to show herself off:

> Well, what with boots and gloves, and a bonnet and a mantle, and a white muslin gown, which was made for me before I left...and a silk gown...I can't help being aware that I am pretty, and that people admire me very much. I found it out first at the Donaldsons. I began to think I did look pretty in my fine new clothes, and I saw that other people thought so too. (494)

This public performance is contrasted with the lonely, hidden life she lives with her mother who resents the threat which the young and beautiful Cynthia presents to her own carefully-constructed display: 'she never seemed to care to have me with her...I was very much in mamma's way' (493). Buoyed up by her list of fashion accessories, however, Cynthia recognises that admiration at the Donaldson's leads to empowerment - 'I was certainly the belle of the house, and it was very pleasant to feel my power' (494) - and in this flush of triumphant display agrees to marry

Preston. Later growing to hate him, and aspiring to marriage instead with one of the genteel Hamley sons, Cynthia is forced into secrecy about her old engagement and then enters into another secret engagement, this time with Roger Hamley. It is at this point, in a chapter entitled 'Secret Thoughts Ooze Out', that Gaskell begins to address Cynthia's worldly understanding of the hidden self. When Osborne Hamley comes to congratulate her, she is quick to try to reduce public knowledge of her secret:

> Pray remember you ought not to have known; it is my own secret, and I particularly wished it not to be spoken about; and I don't like it's being talked about. Oh, the leaking of water through one small hole! (457)

Where Osborne had envisaged a grateful response from Cynthia, 'the unbosoming of a love-sick girl', he meets only silence and distrust (457). As Gaskell makes clear, Cynthia is more in control now of the display she makes in public: 'He little knew Cynthia's nature. The more she suspected that she was called upon for a display of emotion, the less would she show' (457). Despite the reader's sympathy for Cynthia's situation, there is a growing sense of unease at a woman who can conceal actions and motives which are, for a Victorian audience, at best morally mistaken and at worst, morally corrupt. The reaction of the Hollingford community is founded on a distaste for female display, and it is the corrosive power of local gossip which is shown to strip away the layers of social camouflage Cynthia has constructed to reveal the vulnerable, mistaken self: 'I see there's no chance of escaping exposure' she comments when first discovered alone with Preston (486).

In a community which continually reads and misreads public identities, concealment is directly linked with shame. So when Molly becomes entangled with Cynthia's affairs and ostracized from polite society on account of her presumed

liaison with Preston, it is while she is out of sight that the rumours about her moral conduct flourish – and it is with an act of positive display that she is saved. Assured of Molly's innocence, Lady Harriet takes possession of her 'like an inanimate chattel' and parades her around the streets of Hollingford. Not only do the women pass 'twice...through all the length of the principal street of the town' but, more significantly, Molly, for the first time, is persuaded to leave proof of her visit by adding her name to Lady Harriet's calling cards at homes where she left without being seen (560). By revealing her solidarity with Molly, and labelling it in fine curatorial fashion through the tangible and permanent proof offered by the calling cards, Lady Harriet undertakes a piece of social engineering based upon a sophisticated understanding of the social and moral implications of display:

> We've done a good day's work! And better than you're aware of...Hollingford is not the place I take it to be, if it doesn't veer round in Miss Gibson's favour after my to-day's trotting of that child about. (561)

To achieve success, however, Molly has to be objectified as an 'inanimate chattel' that is 'trotted about', revealed beyond her private domestic context to the judgmental, but largely invisible, public beyond through a manufactured piece of display which disregards her emotional confusion and irons out the complexities of her situation.

The objectification that Molly undergoes is an almost inevitable consequence of the construction of a public identity separate from, or partially concealing, a private selfhood. As Kate Flint discusses, the 'dense superflux of signification' which the Victorians were learning to elicit from the various interactions between the self and its social communities can be read as a growing understanding of the relationship between an object and its setting. While the inner self might only be partly suggested,

or understood, through the visible signs on show, a more complex appreciation of the nature of identity allowed the Victorians to begin to display an approved public selfhood, 'deliberately constructed for others to read'.[14] Constructing identity in this way requires not only the judicious use of external objects, and a sophisticated understanding of the codes which they suggest, but a detached, impersonal view of public identity which objectifies this presented self in layers of sanctioned display.

My next chapter examines the St George's Museum in Sheffield where all aspects of display were carefully considered and arranged by John Ruskin, whose understanding of the potential of objects to 'determine what we are' and act as 'the sign of what we are' necessarily shaped the project. Through his collection of objects for, and his writing about, the Museum, Ruskin meticulously constructed an identity 'for others to read', a sense of himself as sage, teacher and reformer distilled from decades of textual engagement and now made visible in the Museum. For Ruskin, however, as much as for Eugene Wrayburn, it was the 'moral influence' that was important, the ability of the objects to improve, instruct and inspire others. The collection and display in Sheffield would, Ruskin hoped, have far-reaching effects, beyond the disclosure of his own interests and personality, moulding the private identity of his museum visitors, and, in a cascading of influence, the social and moral life of the nation.

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[14] Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination,* pp.216-7.

5.   A Panorama in a Pillbox:
Ruskin and the St George's Museum, Sheffield.

> *The first thing we need in England is an accessible Museum,*
> *however small, containing only good art, and chiefly of a quality*
> *which the British public can understand, or may in time come to*
> *understand.* [1]

John Ruskin's exploration of the nature of taste, and the ways in which the

objects we admire, display and collect both express and fashion identity, was not

confined to his written work. In November 1875, he completed the purchase for £600

of a modest stone-built cottage on Bell Hagg Road in Walkley on the western edge of

Sheffield. Within its small rooms he wanted to establish a museum, and in a matter

of weeks, with typical enthusiasm, he had installed a collection and a curator, and the

doors were opened to the public. Although, as we have seen, this was a period of

energetic formation and rapid development for municipal museums across the

country, Ruskin's experiment was very much a personal one. While in many ways it

shared common aims with collections taking form in other major cities, his

contribution to the cultural life of Sheffield was created without reference to local

leaders and with a very specific audience in mind: it was intended for the 'liberal

education of the artizan'.[2] Ruskin, of course, was not unaware of what was happening

elsewhere; he just believed that he could manage things differently, and better. His

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[1] John Ruskin, Appendix to *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 58, October 1875, in *Works*, 28, p.429.

[2] John Ruskin, *Master's Report 1881*, in *Works*, 30, p. 39. Although the city leaders had shown interest in Ruskin's idea of a Museum in Sheffield even before the St George's Museum opened, Ruskin was not predisposed to accept their help or moderate his arrangements to suit municipal plans. When he was offered a room in the city's fledgling Weston Park Museum he declined, commenting that 'your Sheffield ironwork department will necessarily contain the most barbarous abortions that human rudeness have ever produced with human fingers'. *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 7 September 1875 in *Works*, 30, p.305. Given that on several other occasions Ruskin praises the craftsmanship of English metalwork in general, and Sheffield metalwork in particular, this appears to reflect his lack of confidence in those curating the display and offers an example of his occasional inconsistency and even cantankerousness. See, for example, *Works*, 30, p.51.

teaching collection of objects and works of art could, he believed, offer a shining example of what might be achieved with careful thought and tasteful, well-directed leadership. The St George's Museum was to act as a model for revolutionising the public's understanding, and through this, its social, moral and intellectual fabric.

The Museum in Sheffield was to be the public counterpart to private collections Ruskin had been creating and overseeing across the country as he experimented with the concept of small study resources for practical use. As early as 1854 he was expressing to friends a fervent desire:

> to lend out Liber Stüdiorum and Albert Dürers to everybody who wants them; and to make copies of all fine thirteenth-century manuscripts, and lend them out – all for nothing, of course, – and have a room where anybody can go in all day and always see nothing in it but what is good.[3]

In 1861 he donated 48 drawings and watercolours by J. M. W Turner to the University of Oxford and after being appointed Slade Professor of Fine Art there in 1869 he worked to create the Oxford Drawing School, based on a system of practical teaching. To help facilitate this – and to provide visual aids for his lectures – Ruskin donated a collection of around 1400 objects including works by himself, Burne-Jones and Dürer, divided into a 'Standard Series' and a 'Rudimentary Series' and displayed in easily-accessible cabinets.[4] He was also corresponding with sixteen other schools and colleges during this period, often loaning or giving works for study. In particular he sent a number of paintings, manuscripts and drawings to the Whitelands Training College for Girls in Chelsea to be used as teaching aids.

While these other collections were largely based on supplementing the

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[3] Letter to Lady Trevelyan, July 1854, in Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin, The Early Years 1819-1859* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London , 1985), pp.202-3.
[4] For information on the Drawing School see, for example, Robert Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

education of those with some understanding of cultural and aesthetic histories, the Sheffield Museum was as much a social as an aesthetic experiment. It was aimed directly at working men with no art education and few opportunities for improvement, and Sheffield was chosen as the archetype of the overgrown, polluted and dehumanising industrial city: 'a dolorous city [which] would seem to be the grave rather than the cradle of artistic hopes'.[5] Ultimately Ruskin intended the St George's Museum to act as a model for a network of local museums which would ensure that every town with an art school had an almost identical nucleus of works as the foundation for study to improve the lot of the working man: 'series of casts from sculpture and copies, photographs from architecture, drawings, natural objects and engravings of standard value', along with duplicates 'for close examination and free use'.[6] By giving items from the core collections fixed numbers for identification and publishing a reference catalogue, Ruskin envisaged a resource which would allow common research and discussion nationwide. The idea of the Sheffield Museum was rooted less in the art criticism of *Modern Painters* (1843-60) than in the impulses which had driven him to write the social and political criticism which began with the first of four essays sent to the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860 (published two years later as *Unto This Last*) and was, by the 1870s, to have become *Fors Clavigera*, a series of controversial letters to 'The Working Men of Great Britain'. In 1870 he expressed his growing belief in art as a necessary element of subsistence rather than a form of entertainment, and outlined what he considered the social imperatives for a museum:

Life without industry is guilt and industry without art is brutality... beautiful

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[5] Edward Bradbury, 'A Visit to Ruskin's Museum', *The Magazine of Art*, 3 (1879), p.57.
[6] Catherine Morley, *John Ruskin Late Works 1870-1890: The Museum and the Guild of St George, an Educational Experiment* (Garland: New York and London, 1984), p.76.

art can only be produced by people who have beautiful things about them and leisure to look at them and unless you provide some elements of beauty your workmen to be surrounded by, you will find that no elements of beauty can be invented by them.[7]

The St George's Museum was to be the public and visible expression of a series of writings which advocated improved education and opportunity and a social revolution based on new ways of seeing the world.

It was in *Fors* in 1871 that Ruskin first outlined plans for the formation of a 'Company of St George' (renamed 'The Guild of St George' in 1878 because Ruskin disliked the association with trade, and in its turn, the Board of Trade was unsettled by the concept of a Company that did not exist to make money). This was to be a self-sufficient, distinctly hierarchical body, with Ruskin as Master; a reworking of a medieval craftsman's guild which would encourage 'the healthiest and most refined life possible' and act as a means of putting into practice the social reforms he was proposing in his writing.[8] Ruskin intended to draw together like-minded people who, through a combination of direct financial giving and enthusiastic advocacy, would make possible the realisation of a number of experiments. They were to be what Catherine Morley, in her comprehensive study of the Guild, calls the 'spiritual elite', drawn to Ruskin and giving a tithe (later more realistically reduced to 1% of income) to the St George's Fund. Despite, or perhaps because of, these high ideals, however, the actual intentions of the Guild and the practical role of its members 'remained mysterious'.[9] Many of the early supporters joined simply on the strength of Ruskin's personal appeal: while a number were Quakers, hoping for opportunities to

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[7] John Ruskin, *Lectures on Art*, February 16 1870, in *Works*, 20, p.93.
[8] John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 58, October 1875, in *Works*, 28, p.421.
[9] Catherine Morley, *John Ruskin Late Works 1870-1890*, pp.6-7. Morley gives a detailed history of the work of the Guild and sets the Sheffield Museum into the wider context of the other Guild projects.

implement their own social schemes, many others were acquaintances of Ruskin or those for whom a closeness to Ruskin was the prime attraction.

Membership of the Guild seems to have been particularly attractive to middle-class women anxious to do good works. The minutes of the Annual General Meeting on 21st February 1879 record, for example, just nineteen attendees of whom one was George Allen, Ruskin's publisher, two were the curator of the Sheffield Museum, Henry Swan and his wife, and 5 others were women.[10] Although, on the whole, Ruskin conducted the business of the Guild through his male colleagues – only one woman, Fanny Talbot, is included in the thirteen signatories and witnesses to the Memorandum and Articles of Association in 1878 – the participation of female members was not discouraged. The Guild's first acquisition, for example, was eight cottages on freehold land at Barmouth given by Fanny Talbot, so earning her a place among the original companions - 'exactly the kind of property I most wish to obtain for St George's Company'[11] – and of the twenty two subscribers listed in the 1879 accounts, ten are female.[12] Over half of the 'original roll of the Guild' of twenty members were women companions, and by 1884 thirty of the fifty seven members were women.

Some of these female supporters seem to have been active in raising awareness of, and money for, Guild schemes. Accounts for the St Mark's (Venice) Fund for 1880 and 1881 include entries for Miss Young, whose donations of almost £4 were not personal subscriptions but had been, more actively, 'collected'. Although there is no indication of where, or from whom, the collection was made, it is possible

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[10] Minute Book 1879-1925, Sheffield City Archives, GSG1.
[11] John Ruskin, *Works,* 30, p.xxvii.
[12] John Ruskin, *Works,* 30, p.125.

that Miss Young drew on her own female circle for support.[13] Despite their visibility on the membership and subscription lists, however, Ruskin appears to have had little clear idea about what his female supporters could achieve. When Blanche Atkinson, the daughter of a Liverpool soap manufacturer, became one of the first members, she enquired of her duties and received a reply which demonstrates the vagueness of Ruskin's ambitions for his supporters in general, and his patronizing assumptions about the scope of female influence in particular:

> Your duty for many a day to come may be merely to make talk more rational when you have a chance among the ladies after dinner; to laugh a foolish young man out of a proposed folly; or to show a prettier and simpler fashion in some inexpensive way which will make people imitate it, and look better than they did, or feel comfortable.[14]

Despite the apparent vacuity of advocating 'prettier and simpler' fashions or engaging in 'more rational' talk, Ruskin clearly expected much from the Guild. It was not only female supporters, however, who were given unclear guidance about its practical purpose. The Guild attracted 82 members during Ruskin's lifetime, but few knew exactly what they were supporting. Ruskin rarely discussed important schemes in his letters to them and most of the lesser projects he proposed were vague and impractical – in 1872, for example, he employed three road sweepers around the British Museum in a futile attempt to keep the streets clean, and in 1874 a tea shop was opened by the Guild at 19, Paddington Street, London in an area far too poor to support it. In the opening to the Master's Report of 1879, he admits to members that much of the blame for the apparent unpopularity of the Guild experiment lies with his inability to be clearer about its role:

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[13] John Ruskin, Appendix to the General Statement 1882, in *Works,* 30, p.63-6.
[14] John Ruskin, Letter to Blanche Atkinson (3 April 1873). Ryl Eng Ms 1163 (4), Collection of the John Rylands University Library, Manchester.

> [The] Master cannot but condole with them on the smallness of their numbers; nor would he at all desire them to take either pride or comfort in any sacred texts, or accepted aphorisms, concerning the value of little flocks[...]He takes much blame for himself for want of clearness in exposition of the work to be done; and he confesses not a little discouragement to himself in perceiving, even in cases where he has made the nature of it intelligible, how very unwilling most people are to have a hand in it.[15]

Ruskin's original intention, as announced in Letter 5 of *Fors* in 1871, was 'the buying and securing of land in England, which shall not be built upon, but cultivated by Englishmen with their own hands', and land reclamation was to be at the heart of the Guild's more ambitious projects.[16] In December 1877 Ruskin bought 13 acres of land at St George's Farm in Totley, just outside Sheffield, in order to establish a commune of self-sufficient farmers. None of the men had agricultural experience, however, and a series of hard winters and prolonged disagreement between them soon threatened the experiment. Ruskin, who had impracticably precluded the use of steam-powered machinery on the farm, reported two years later that the would-be farmers were still turning to him for constant support:

> The Master, to his great regret, must beg the members of the Guild to remember that his knowledge does not qualify him, nor do the nature of his general occupations permit him, to undertake the personal discussion of any farming operations – the Master may authorise expenditure in draining a fen, or enclosing a piece of sea-sand; but is not be to expected to survey the fall of the channels or design the foundations of the embankment.[17]

In an attempt to stabilise things, Ruskin appointed William Harrison Riley as farm manager, but Riley 'liked smoking better than digging' and the original members of the scheme became disillusioned and left.[18] Although the farm continued under the

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[15] John Ruskin, 'Master's Report 1879', in *Works,* 30, p.15.

[16] John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera,* Letter 5, May 1871, in *Works,* 27, p.95.

[17] John Ruskin, *Master's Report* 1879, in *Works,* 30, pp.18-19.

[18] John Ruskin, Letter to Edward Carpenter (18 May 1880). Sheffield City Archives 386-16. qtd in Janet Barnes, *Ruskin in Sheffield* (Sheffield: Sheffield Arts and Museums, 1985), p.24.

Guild until it was sold in 1929, it never became profitable and never fulfilled the original socialist ideal of communal living.

It was to be Ruskin's other Sheffield enterprise, the St George's Museum, which was to become one of the most enduring legacies of the Guild's projects at this time.[19] The quasi-religious status of the Guild was perhaps better suited to creating and maintaining a repository of objects rather than a farming community. It was Ruskin's new faith in man's natural potential for redemption which had inspired his writing of *Fors Clavigera,* leading directly to the establishment of the Guild as an alternative solution to what he saw as the failed structure of the Church. Each of the new members of the Guild was asked to seal a personal and spiritual pact with Ruskin by swearing to eight articles of a Creed 'with the solemnity of a vow'.[20] While the first article required members to affirm trust 'in the Living God, Father Almighty' borrowing its format and terms from the more familiar Creeds of organised religion, the second reflected Ruskin's much more personal faith in man: 'I trust in the nobleness of human nature, in the majesty of its faculties'.[21] Its reference to the potential 'majesty' of human faculties hinted at the importance the Museum was to assume in Guild activities. Visual objects had always implied for Ruskin a spiritual power: as Dinah Birch notes, for Ruskin, 'spiritual vision and physical vision are not separate. Both have the power to shape action, and to motivate

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[19] The St George's Museum moved to a new site at Meersbrook in Sheffield in 1890 where it was renamed The Ruskin Museum. It remained there until the 1950s when the lease expired and the collection was moved into storage. In 1985 it was relaunched as the Ruskin Gallery on Surrey Street, and was re-invented again in 2000 when it moved to the city's new Millennium Galleries. See Barnes, *Ruskin in Sheffield.*
[20] John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera,* Letter 58, October 1875 in *Works,* 28, p.419.
[21] ibid.

reform'.[22] The creation of a collection at the heart of the Guild sat comfortably with its devotional status and the same month as the Museum opened in Sheffield, Ruskin's *Fors* letter drew extensively on the vocabulary of worship and religious observance to try to explain its purpose:

> A 'Museum', 'belonging to the Muses', is to enable people to devote a certain portion of secluded laborious and reverent life to the attainment of the Divine Wisdom, which the Greeks supposed to be the gift of Apollo, or of the Sun; and which the Christian knows to be the gift of Christ.[23]

The language of monastic seclusion and reverence imbues the Museum with a religious significance. The realities of forming a collection of objects and making it available to the public in order to create opportunities for practical learning are characteristically couched in mystical language which at once elevates and occludes the actual experience on offer.

Whatever Ruskin's aspirations for the St George's Museum as a source of divine wisdom, a rational examination of the cottage in Sheffield demonstrates an environment bound by practical considerations of space and display as much as by more transcendental ambitions. The original Museum was tiny. Alongside the curator Henry Swan, his wife and three children, Ruskin wanted to accommodate a collection of books and manuscripts, minerals and geological specimens, paintings, watercolours, drawings and photographs, plastercast reproductions of architectural detail, purpose-designed display furniture and some choice natural specimens:

> 'Wouldst thou think it?' exclaimed a cramped Swan in 1879:
>
> The whole space we have at command for displaying either to royal princes, or to nascent genius is – one room 13' square. I dare say that thou hast seen the report in the Times which tells folk that the museum consists of

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[22] Dinah Birch (ed.), *John Ruskin: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.x.
[23] John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 59, November 1875, in *Works*, 28, p.450.

a 'small mansion situated in its own grounds'. Well, that's reporters' English for a five-room cottage, lying in a freehold land allotment. [24]

It was not only those trying to live and work in the Museum who were frustrated by its size. In 1885, the critic for the *National Review* recorded the 'perplexity' of visitors who had expected a much grander and more spacious environment:

> never did art and culture find a humbler home than this little room [...] in which rare stones, fine engravings, choice pictures, valuable books and manuscripts, are packed so closely together that one cannot help being reminded of the inside of a box. Certainly it is a very well-arranged box, and very interesting to trained eyes and appreciative minds; but to many visitors [...] a continual cause of wonder and perplexity. 'Is that all?' they would say, looking round and round the tiny room, in which, it must indeed be admitted, there really is NOT air enough for more than three or 4 people to breathe in comfort. [25]

Although Ruskin did his best to alleviate the cramped conditions – the Guild bought small plots of land adjoining the house in 1877, 1881 and 1884, and in 1878 an extension was built for the curator's family – it was the unexpected smallness of the Museum which continued to impress visitors. In 1880, *The Times* reported on the need to enlarge the original display space: 'crowded with precious stones, rare pictures, and valuable books, there is not much space for students'.[26] Similarly, Edward Bradbury, reporting on his second visit to the Museum in 1888 for the *Magazine of Art*, marvelled that: 'probably there is no apartment in the world which crowds together so much that is of unique interest and artistic value in so confined a space. It is a picture-gallery in a portfolio; a panorama in a pillbox'.[27]

Just as reporters juxtaposed a sense of crowded conditions with the rarity and value of the objects on display, so Ruskin's ambitious, even religious, aspirations for

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[24] Qtd in Morley, *John Ruskin Late Works 1870-1890*, p.59.
[25] E.S.P., 'Mr Ruskin's Museum at Sheffield,' *National Review,* 1885, pp.404-5.
[26] *The Times*, 3 May 1880, p.8.
[27] Edward Bradbury, 'Mr Ruskin's Museum at Sheffield', *The Magazine of Art,* 11, 1888, p.346.

the Museum as a place where one might attain Divine Wisdom were set against the empirical reality of creating a public display area in a small cottage. It was a juxtaposition of the practical with the ideal which was evident in the body of Ruskin's later work which, as Francis O'Gorman explores, drew inspiration from, and created links between, a variety of contexts from personal faith to historical perspective and social conscience.[28] In his lecture 'The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century' (1884), for example, Ruskin combined intense actual scrutiny of climatic conditions and close observations of 'a series of cloud phenomena', with transcendental metaphors of the destruction of Victorian society:

> That harmony is now broken, and broken the world round; fragments, indeed, of what existed still exist, and hours of what is past still return; but month by month the darkness gains upon the day.[29]

While the museum experiment in Sheffield was much more positive in nature than writings such as this, it too combined the actual with the imaginary; the reality of a carefully-described and closely-organised space with the visionary quest for self-improvement and enlightenment. The Museum was to create a site for both the visible and the invisible; its objects were newly conceptualising the links between the empirical and the transcendental, allowing the visitor to occupy other times and spaces while retaining a firm anchor in Ruskin's present, his crowded 'panorama in a pillbox'. Above all the Museum occupied an ambiguous status between the visual and the textual. It was not simply the culmination of Ruskin's theories on art and museums – it was an attempt to make tangible the writing of thirty years and thirty-nine volumes.

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[28] For a detailed survey and wide-ranging discussion of Ruskin's later writing see Francis O'Gorman, *Late Ruskin: New Contexts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).
[29] John Ruskin, 'The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century', in *Works*, 34, p.78.

Ruskin was acutely aware of the actual demands made by objects on display.

Asked to catalogue the Turner bequest of paintings to the National Gallery he had

offered advice (which was largely ignored) about the best conditions for display,

proposing a new labyrinthine Turner Gallery. His criticism of the South Kensington

Museum was, as I have noted in an earlier chapter, characteristically passionate. He

accused Henry Cole of 'corrupting the system of art teaching all over England into a

state of abortion and falsehood from which it will take 20 years to recover',[30] and

openly criticised both the Museum and, it appears, its visitors:

> fragments of really true and precious art are buried and polluted amidst a
> mass of loathsome modern mechanisms, fineries and fatuity, and have the
> souls trodden out of them, and the lustre polluted on them...at which the
> foul English public snout grunts in an amazed manner, finding them
> wholly flavourless.[31]

The horrors of South Kensington and the desire to do better in Sheffield were

intimately connected in Ruskin's thinking. It was against the South Kensington

example that the St George's Museum was to define itself: as Ruskin continued in his

discussion of the London model in *Fors,* '*now, therefore,* the first thing we need in

England is an accessible museum' (my italics).[32] In a letter to Henry Swan he was to

reiterate the belief that the Sheffield experiment was to stand in contrast to 'the

accursed mess' of the bigger national museums in general and 'show what can be

done with proper light and illustrations'.[33]

In an attempt to make possible the accessibility Ruskin identified as a key

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[30] John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 79, July 1877, in *Works*, 29, p.154.
[31] John Ruskin, Appendix to *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 58, October 1875, in *Works*, 29, p.560.
[32] ibid.
[33] John Ruskin, Letter to Henry Swan (November 15 1883). Rosenbach Collection.

requirement of the public museum, admission to the Sheffield site was free and the building was open daily, except Thursdays, from nine in the morning until nine at night and, unusually, from 2-6 on Sunday afternoons. It was also open by appointment on other occasions.[34] Henry Swan, a man 'strongly influenced with the Ruskin spirit', was on hand to help visitors explore the collection and ensure that they understood the messages Ruskin was hoping his objects would convey.[35] Ruskin even designed a number of pieces of furniture to make access to the works easier and more intimate. This included, for example, an innovative system of displaying prints in pull-out frames so that visitors could make close studies of the works.

In Sheffield, Ruskin wanted to put into practice the rules on showing works of art which he had articulated through his writing: white-walled, uncluttered rooms with a single hanging line, with good light, where simplicity and clarity of display emphasised the primacy of the object; the antithesis of the colourful, highly-patterned, densely-packed exhibition rooms of, for example, the Royal Academy. So in his extensive correspondence with his curator Ruskin was keen to discuss display requirements. Sculptural casts were to be given space and lit from the left 'with desks below for students to draw on';[36] the walls were to be 'as pure white as can be got without poison'[37] and Swan was urged to 'Put everything away but what people can see clearly and keep the rest clear and comfortable in the little room'.[38] Contemporary photographs of the collection on display, however, emphasise the limitations of space which were to undermine such idealism. Despite Ruskin's

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[34] Details of opening times etc can be found in Bradbury, 'A Visit to Ruskin's Museum'.
[35] 'The Faithful Steward of the Ruskin Museum by one who knew him,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 April 1889, p.6.
[36] John Ruskin, Letter to Emily Swan (January 5 1877). Rosenbach Collection.
[37] John Ruskin, Letter to Henry Swan (November 2 1875). Rosenbach Collection.
[38] John Ruskin, Letter to Henry Swan (May 13 1885). Rosenbach Collection.

continual evocation of the perfect museum, the actual gallery with which visitors were presented at Walkley, even after it had been extended, had paintings in multiple hangings and even – in the case of Bunney's *St Mark's*, for example, which was too large to be hung at all – leaned against walls; heavily and darkly-curtained alcoves against which works were displayed; plastercasts set on high shelves and rather randomly lit, and a minimum of study space. It was less the spacious retreat Ruskin had envisaged and articulated, and more the closely-packed box which reviewers had experienced.

In addition to the internal spaces, Ruskin gave considerable thought to choosing an appealing location for the Museum. He picked an unspectacular but prepossessing environment which contrasted with the grime of the city and, he hoped, would prove inviting. It was to be a 'mountain home...to beguile the artisan' out of the Sheffield smoke.[39] Edward Bradbury described the first impressions of the visitor:

> This legend-bearing wicket gives access to a garden-plot of about an acre in extent, with a miniature apple-orchard, and bushes of evergreens and old-fashioned flowers, and to a detached stone-house that might be the residence of a country school-master or rural rector with a little living. Externally there is nothing remarkable about the house. It is, in fact, very plain and commonplace in appearance...It is not artistic; only square, grey, bleak, ugly, English and comfortable. But the landscape it commands is a painter's dream of scenic loveliness...We are here only two miles away from the black heart of the grimy kingdom of industry.[40]

Even in his choice of location, however, Ruskin's dual impulses for the Museum are evident. It was not just the convenience of the spot which appealed; he was eager to emphasise the symbolism of the hill-side site: 'the climb to knowledge and truth is

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[39] John Ruskin, Letter to *The Times*, 6 March 1883, in *Works,* 30, p.317.
[40] Bradbury, 'A Visit to Ruskin's Museum', p.57.

ever steep, and the gems found at the top are small, but precious and beautiful'.[41]

Again in *Fors,* he discusses the Museum's position simultaneously as a practical and spiritual inspiration, allowing for healthy exercise alongside a more cerebral engagement:

> The museum has been set...on the top of a high and steep hill – that the approach to it may be at once symbolically instructive and practically sanitary.[42]

While Sheffield attracted him because it was the archetypal industrial city, dehumanising its workforce and offering few alternatives to manufacturing hardship, Walkley was, by contrast, the 'mountain home'. Ruskin was making a pragmatic choice but negotiating its reception and couching it in the language of religion, devotion and symbol in order to elevate it from the ordinary. It was an intention evident to intelligent visitors and Edward Bradbury, after his first visit, pointed out to his readers:

> Mr Ruskin has placed his museum just where the contrast between the town and country, between the work of God and that of man, is seen in most effective contrast.[43]

Despite Ruskin's desire to locate the Museum at the heart of industrial activity, it was its identity as some kind of 'other' which lingered, a sense of it removed from the practical hardships of the city and reinventing instead something less local and more visionary. So Bradbury in his review of the Museum describes the 'painter's dream of scenic loveliness' in language which emphasises the remoteness, the difference and the otherness of the Museum's location. The

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[41] '"Reminiscences of Ruskin" by Howard Swan', *The Westminster Gazette,* 24 January 1890, in *Works,* 30, p.xlii.

[42] John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera,* Letter 59, November 1875, in *Works,* 28, p.451.

[43] Bradbury, 'A Visit to Ruskin's Museum,' p.57.

surrounding hills and valleys, he claims, are 'suggestive of the Alps', the Museum is

'*almost* within sight of the furnace fires; *almost* within hearing of the hammers'. It

sits in a 'tranquil haven *at the very edge* of a throbbing whirlpool of giant forces'[44]

(my italics). Other reviewers too were to pick up on the theme of Venice, evident in

many examples in the collection, to emphasise the sense of foreignness which

pervaded the place. It was a local museum for local people, but it was not of

Sheffield – it was a world apart, making tangible Ruskin's personal vision and

allowing visitors imaginative space in which to conduct their search for

transcendental Wisdom.

Similarly complex ambitions can also be traced in Ruskin's attitudes to the

visitors themselves. The 'legend-bearing wicket' leading into the Museum garden

was, as Bradbury describes, the first thing to greet a visitor from the city. The notice

Ruskin chose to fix to this gate was an extract from Letter 59 of *Fors* outlining a

definition of the purposes of a museum and acting as a daunting reminder to anyone

who might have thought of entering without the most clearly-defined intentions:

> A museum is [...] primarily not at all a place of entertainment, but a place of
> education. And a museum is [...] not a place of elementary education, but that
> of already far-advanced scholars. And it is by no means the same thing as a
> parish school, or a Sunday school, or a day school, or even – the Brighton
> Aquarium.[45]

Ruskin's Museum was not a flippant attraction to relieve the grind of daily work. It

had the solemn aim of educating the working man and, as Ruskin had explained

elsewhere, providing an education was not simply about giving access to

information. It was about more weighty principles of moral behaviour and social

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[44] ibid.
[45] ibid.

order: 'Educate or govern, they are one and the same word. Education does not mean

teaching people to know what they do not know. It means teaching them to behave as

they do not behave'.[46] As the first in the planned series of museums pledged to

improve the standard of education and create opportunities for working people across

the country, the St George's Museum in Sheffield bore the weight of extensive

expectations. Ruskin must have been relieved when others appeared to appreciate his

intentions: *The Sheffield and Rotherham Red Book and Almanack* ran accounts of the

Museum in 1881 and 1882, with the emphasis firmly on education rather than

entertainment:

> the St George's Museum is not intended for the recreation of mere sight-
> seers – though visitors are freely admitted – but as a type of the
> educational museums which Mr Ruskin, as Master of the "St George's
> Guild" desires to see established throughout the nation.[47]

Many of Ruskin's written comments might suggest that the Museum was

firmly rooted in a realistic understanding of the needs of the manufacturing labourers

for better educational opportunities and the potential role of the Museum as a means

of providing these. A closer look at the actual nature of the visitor, however, suggests

a confusion which highlights an idealism as much in the concept of the visitor as in

the broader ambitions for the Museum itself. Just as the Museum was simultaneously

engaged with the realities of the industrial city and held apart from it, so Ruskin's

visitor appears to be both a practical man in search of improvement and an idealised

construct more closely connected to the mystical search for Wisdom.

The St George's Museum was not a national institution. It did not, unlike

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[46] John Ruskin, *The Crown of Wild Olive*, Lecture IV, 'The Future of England', December 14 1869, in *Works*, 28, p.502.
[47] *The Sheffield and Rotherham Red Book and Almanack* 1882, p.93. Sheffield City Archives Drought Collection, ACC 1998/11 Add.

many of the other museums I have discussed, take its turn in receiving loan exhibitions from South Kensington, nor was it directly bound to the municipal ambitions of the city. Its public profile was intentionally modest. Ruskin recognised that even though it might draw some far-flung visitors because of its association with his name, his small collection was primarily of interest to local people who had no other visual resource. Yet the wicket-gate notice announced that the Museum was intended for 'already far-advanced scholars'. Finding these among the local population would, perhaps, have been unproblematic if Ruskin was aiming at the middle and upper classes of the city, but not only was his experiment aimed pointedly at working men - 'I hope it may be filled by workmen'[48] – it appears as though the higher Sheffield classes remained more or less unmoved by the Museum. Ten years after it opened, Swan had still not identified any wealthy or middle-class patrons who 'would be likely to understand'.[49]

Education provision in Sheffield in the 1870s, however, was not of a standard to supply Ruskin with working men who were also well-educated men. The first public Museum in the city did not open until 1875, the same year as the St George's Museum, and there was no art gallery until 1887 when the collection of John Newton Mappin (1800-1883) was opened for the public as the Mappin Art Gallery. Sheffield's only claim to educational innovation was a People's College, founded in 1842 by the Reverend R. S. Bayley and providing early morning and evening

[48] 'A Visit of Prince Leopold to the Walkley Museum', *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 23 October 1879, in *Works*, 30, p.313.

[49] Henry Swan, Letter to W. Abercrombie (27 August 1885). Swan tells Abercrombie that he has been offered a copy of Young's *Night Thoughts* hand-coloured by Blake. 'I had thought of trying whether there were any Sheffield gentleman with means who might be induced to buy it and present it to the Museum – but I know none who at present would be likely to understand'. Abercrombie Archive, the Ruskin Library, University of Lancaster.

lectures. The College was self-financing, relying on students paying fees for attending classes and working on a model of self-directed learning driven by the students themselves. Although it survived until 1878 - and was to inspire, among other similar institutions, The Working Men's College in London - it was always short of money. Library facilities were inadequate and it is unlikely that any single student could, even by regular attendance, have acquired a broad in-depth education which would have qualified them as 'far-advanced'.[50] As in most major urban centres, Sheffield had a Mechanics' Institute, but it taught a limited range of subjects which excluded, for example, geology and botany, two of Ruskin's most passionate interests and almost certainly those he would consider essential to an advanced education. Nor, as we have seen elsewhere, was the presence of a Mechanics' Institute a guarantee of working class education: many of its students were clerks, shopmen and lower-paid professionals keen for advancement. Contemporary commentators, aware of the shortcomings of existing educational institutions and the reservations of potential pupils, recognised that Ruskin's chances of finding his ideal visitor in Sheffield were slim:

> That [the museum] can have any immediate wide-spread influence upon the working classes of the neighbourhood, for whose benefit it is arranged, is scarcely to be expected [...] the working men of Sheffield will assuredly need a good deal of instruction, elementary and other, before they are able to appreciate and profit by the treasures here placed for them. To the advanced student of Nature and Art the Museum will, indeed, be invaluable; but I doubt there will as yet be found no considerable number of such students in the smokiest town in England. St George's Museum must be looked upon rather as a storehouse of valuable things for future service than as a place of individual utility.[51]

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[50] For a detailed history of the People's College, see Barnes, *Ruskin in Sheffield*, pp.16-17.

[51] 'Mr Ruskin's Museum' possibly by John Ward, from an unidentified cutting in the newspaper archive, Ruskin Library, University of Lancaster.

By 1881, *The Times* was suggesting that Ruskin would have to content himself with welcoming beginners to the Museum, looking to a time only in the future when he could hope to work with those with a more advanced education: 'He has...decided now to retain the present place and enlarge it, with the hope that another museum may spring out of it at some future time. The one will be for beginners, the other for more advanced students'.[52]

It was not only the educational status of the visitor which Ruskin seemed to have been idealising. A closer consideration of the nature of the 'workmen' he wanted the Museum to serve illustrates again a gap between the apparent pragmatism of his experiment and the influence of an ideal he was constructing in his writing. In *Fors*, for example, Ruskin claims hopefully that his working visitor 'will join to scientific teaching this study of art and nature' offered by the Museum.[53] He is disparagingly clear that it is not intended as a refuge for 'the utterly squalid and ill bred' or to be 'encumbered by the idle or disgraced by the disreputable'.[54] Instead it is clear that he envisages his craftsman's Guild attracting to it the trained and sensitive relic of the mediaeval artisan. It is a model of the worker which had emerged throughout his writings in the 1860s. In *Unto this Last* (1860), for example, he praises 'labour of good quality' which 'included always as much intellect and feeling as will fully and harmoniously regulate the physical force'.[55] Again, in a lecture in 1869, he praises the thinking labourer who demonstrates a moral understanding and aesthetic sensitivity which informs manual skill:

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[52] *The Times*, 24 May 1881, p.7.
[53] 'A Visit of Prince Leopold to the Walkley Museum,' *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 23 October 1879, in *Works*, 30, p.313.
[54] John Ruskin, 'A Museum and Picture Gallery', 1880 in *Works*, 34, p.250.
[55] John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, in *Works*, 17, p.5.

> If stone work is well put together, it means that a thoughtful man planned it, and a careful man cut it, and an honest man cemented it. If it has too much ornament, it means that its carver was too greedy of pleasure; if too little, that he was rude, or insensitive or stupid.[56]

Ruskin returns regularly to his term 'artisan' as though to differentiate a new breed of working man in the medieval tradition, but beyond the conjunction of skilled hand and thinking mind, there is little clarity from Ruskin as to the actual nature of the artisan nor does he give real-life examples as illustrations. His sense of Sheffield as a place where artisan skill remained evident was, however, influential in the choice of a home for the Museum. Although Ruskin despised the industrialisation on which the city's success was founded, he appreciated the craftsmanship inherent in most of the metalworking trades. While the manual labour of the cutlery and tool grinders may not have been skilled enough to qualify many of its proponents as artisans, the associated silversmithing and fine metalworking crafts were clearly respected by Ruskin:

> I am now frequently asked why I chose Sheffield... rather than any other town. The answer is a simple one – that I acknowledge Ironwork as an art always necessary and useful to man, and English work in iron as masterful of its kind. I scarcely know any other branch of manufacture in which England could even hope to surpass, or in which it is even her duty to strive for equality with the skill of other countries.[57]

Although partly grounded in the reality of the city's industries, however, Ruskin's concept of the artisan remained an indefinite and illusive term on which to model the museum visitor, one largely founded on a literary ideal developed through his writing. In correspondence about the Museum, he expresses a distinct, if enthusiastic, vagueness about 'the men': 'I should like to meet the men', he advises Swan in 1876

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[56] John Ruskin, 'The Queen of the Air', in *Works,* 19, p.9
[57] John Ruskin, General Statement 1882, in *Works,* 30, p.51.

and a few days later, 'I am so glad to hear the men are interested', and 'the museum

is intended for the artisan, whatever that might mean'.[58]

Despite the fact that the craft trades of Sheffield employed large numbers of

female workers, perhaps the only clearly identifying feature of Ruskin's artisan is that

he is male. Partly this can be explained by the unskilled nature of the tasks

undertaken by women, who were employed largely as buffer girls finishing cutlery

rather than in skilled trades and who thus fell outside Ruskin's ideal. There was also

a fundamental objection, however, despite the female membership of the Guild, to

'wasting' the precious resources of the Museum (and presumably cluttering its

already overcrowded spaces) on women visitors. This gender distinction was not

simply evident from Ruskin's habitual address to 'the ordinary workman'.[59] In March

1882 Rosalind Webling wrote to Ruskin to ask how best to use the Museum. 'The St

George's Museum is for working men, not little girls and you must not waste Mr

Swan's time,' replied Ruskin curtly. 'Go to the National Gallery.' [60]

Although few detailed records survive of the visitors to the St George's

Museum there is some evidence that female supporters were undaunted by such

discouragement. The first entries in the visitors' book for 1 September 1880 (the first

year available), are by an Amelia and Ada Clarke, both local, from Hepworth and

Attercliffe respectively. The stream of women visitors continues unabated, often

visiting in groups: later in September, for example, Mrs Howard, from Sheffield,

brought sixteen friends. Entries in children's handwriting also suggest that diligent

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[58] John Ruskin, Letters to Henry Swan (February 1 and 14, 1876). Rosenbach Collection.
[59] John Ruskin, General Statement 1882, in *Works*, 30, p.56.
[60] John Ruskin, Letter to Rosalind Webling (6 March 1882) qtd. in Morley, *John Ruskin, Late Works*, p.68.

mothers may have brought their families for an educational experience – Mary, Tom, Jonathan and Lilly Fox from nearby Daniel Hill Street in Walkley are recorded in a childish hand as being among the visitors in Autumn of 1880. Similarly, several parents sign on behalf of their children: in December 1880, for example, T.E and T.G Shuttleworth were accompanied by their two daughters. Ironically, it also appears as though Rosalind Webling had already tasted the forbidden charms of the Museum by the time she was insulted by Ruskin in March 1882 – the visitors' book for April 1881, almost a year earlier, records her visit from 6 Wellington Terrace, London, accompanied by (presumably) her sister, Josephine. In all, a third of the visitors represented in the early pages of the visitors' books (September – December 1880) are female, and from a range of social classes, from Lady Cunliffe Owen and her daughter Elizabeth to Mary Newbold of Spital Hill and Mrs Hobson of Pitsmoor, who both signed the book with crosses.

The majority of entries in the visitors' books (around two thirds) are made by people giving local addresses. Although there are some who have clearly made a special journey – Enoch Ward of the South Kensington Art School, for example, visited twice in Autumn 1880, while December 1880 recorded a visit by A.W. Megson from Victoria, Australia – the ambition for the Museum to act as a local resource rather than a national attraction was apparently achieved. Even those who have travelled to visit the museum mostly record addresses from within the region – Nottingham, Rotherham, Harrogate, Pontefract, Huddersfield, Wakefield, Hull – while visitors from Sheffield represent almost every district of the city: Attercliffe, Nether Edge, Walkley, Upperthorpe, Heeley, Crosspool, Owlerton, Pitsmoor, Shude Hill, Darnall, Spital Hill. While educational opportunities in Sheffield may have been

generally poor, and Ruskin's aspirations for the artisan high, it is apparent that some visitors did come close to matching his ideal of the thoughtful, informed working man. It is noticeable, for example, that of the Sheffield districts listed in the early visitors' book, only a handful would, at this time, have been middle-class semi-rural strongholds on the Western edges of the city. Most are deep in the heart of the industrial centre and East End and were more likely to have been inhabited by those closely associated with the metal trades and heavy industries. Several of the visitors identify themselves as 'student' and several make return visits, suggesting a programme of study. Henry Kay, 'student', for example, visited regularly during 1880 and 1881 as did M.G. Marsh, 'student', accompanied by his wife or sister Sara, the only woman to record frequent study visits. In February 1881 Thomas J. Brown, from Sheffield, describes himself as an 'art metal worker', a craftsman, perhaps something approaching Ruskin's 'artisan'.

A *Times* report of 1880 reinforces the impression given by the visitors' books that working men were appreciating what Ruskin was offering in the Museum:

> A public subscription has been started to defray the costs of adding a wing to the building. The subscription has been opened by working men, about twenty of whom have contributed 1 shilling each.[61]

This, at the least, suggests twenty regular students from the working class making use of the Museum and keen to see its expansion. Although nothing is known of these individual subscribers there is detailed evidence that at least one working-class artisan became a regular and successful student at St George's Museum. Benjamin Creswick was born in Sheffield in 1853. He was a table-knife grinder and by 1881 he had married and moved with his extended family to 120 Bell Hagg Road, a few yards

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[61] *The Times*, 8 March 1880, p.12.

from the Museum. He used the collection frequently and, encouraged by Swan, borrowed some photos of Ruskin in order to model a bust. The curator was so impressed with the result that he persuaded Ruskin to agree to a sitting in person, with the Museum finding the expenses for Creswick's trip to Coniston.[62] Ruskin was delighted with the finished piece, valuing it highly enough to give it as a gift to Prince Leopold on his visit to the Museum in 1879. In the same year Creswick is recorded as attending the Guild's annual general meeting, and so has clearly been accepted into Ruskin's most elevated circle – in fact, Creswick, who was clearly a conscientious member, is still recorded as attending Guild meetings thirty years later.[63] After his study at St George's Museum, Creswick went on to national success as a sculptor and exhibited at the Sheffield Society of Artists, the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, the Royal Society of Artists, Birmingham and the Royal Academy. In many ways he fits the model for Ruskin's ideal artisan: a craftsman from the metalworking trades, it is through regular visiting and the close observation skills of an artist that he educates himself.

Even when such a hybrid visitor as Creswick has been found, however, there remain doubts as to his absolute suitability for fulfilling the Ruskin ideal. Sometime in the early 1880s, Creswick retired from grinding and began to concentrate on his sculptural career.[64] This runs contrary to Ruskin's clear demands that the learning made available through the collection should be undertaken not with a view to

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[62] The accounts show a payment of £3-3 on 22nd October 1877. Archive of the St George's Museum, Ruskin Gallery, Sheffield, 22/x/77.

[63] Benjamin Creswick's name appears on the list of attendances at the Guild AGM in 1909. Minute Book 1879-1925, Sheffield City Archives, GSG1.

[64] Creswick's retirement came initially on medical advice rather than as a result of exalted artistic ambition, but he made the most of his new status to advance his career as artist.

worldly advancement but simply to improve the individual's moral and cultural stature. This principle of education for its own sake had been central to Ruskin's thinking long before he began to consider the Sheffield Museum. At The Working Men's College in London, where he taught from the mid-1850s, Ruskin was asked by a wheelwright to teach him to draw a wheel. Ruskin replied 'I don't teach anything special or technical. I teach drawing in general, so that any one learning from me would have the power of drawing anything that's before him'.[65] The wheelwright did not join the class. To a Royal Commission in 1857, Ruskin reiterated this view of his teaching at The Working Men's College as 'directed not to making a carpenter an artist, but to making him happier as a carpenter'.[66] By 1870 in 'Lectures on Art', the first Oxford lectures, Ruskin was emphasising not the improvement of skill which a better education made possible, but the clearer appreciation of moral and social roles which an understanding of art facilitated:

> ...the day's work of a man like Mantegna or Paul Veronese consists of an unfaltering, uninterrupted, succession of movements of the hand more precise than those of the finest fencer[...] determine for yourselves whether a manhood like that is consistent with any viciousness of soul, with any mean anxiety or gnawing lust, any wretchedness of spite or remorse, any consciousness of rebellion against law of God or man, or any actual, though unconscious, violation of even the least law to which obedience is essential for the glory of life and the pleasing of its Giver.[67]

While Ruskin recognised the intrinsic importance of the education the Museum provided in opening the eyes of the visitor to the greater world about him - 'He was only a machine before, an animated tool,' he comments famously in 'The Nature of

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[65] J. F. C. Harrison, *A History of the Working Men's College 1854-1904*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), p.66.
[66] ibid.
[67] John Ruskin, 'Lectures on Art', in *Works*, 20, pp.78-9.

Gothic'[68] – he expected the newly-awakened artisan to continue contributing to society through manual labour, rather than seeking out different activities. The education on offer at the Museum would help the artisan to better understand his place in relationship to both God and human social networks, and should be undertaken with this altruistic purpose in mind rather than to enlarge his 'pockets, wages and other substantialities'.[69] Ruskin's ideal visitor will not, like Creswick, swap the hardship of manufacturing for a more artistic career but will become even more appreciative of the value of his craft skills.

By 1877, when the St George's Museum was well-established, Ruskin was able to elaborate on his vision for manual labour in a letter to his god-daughter, Constance Oldham:

> I'm not at all thankful to see that you have never yet understood the first principle of <u>Fors</u> that the work required is Manual labour directly – Production of Food, Fuel, Lodging – or clothes. Copying is of no use! It is only a stupider form of writing. Drawing is of no use – Studying is of no use – Preaching is of no use.[70]

The letter is an excellent example of Ruskin's ambivalence. He went to great lengths to provide in the Museum works of art specifically intended to act as inspiration for drawing and copying, and a library encouraging comprehensive study of everything from natural history to poetry. Objects which he had donated to Oxford, Whitelands College and Sheffield (and items from his own collection at Brantwood) were frequently being shuffled between venues during the 1870s and early 1880s as Ruskin reconsidered their use on a practical basis for students learning to draw and

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[68] John Ruskin, The Nature of Gothic', in *Stones of Venice. Works,* 10, p.192.

[69] John Ruskin, *Modern Art,* in Works, 19, p.216.

[70] John Ruskin, Letter to Constance Oldham (15 September 1877), Ryl. Eng. Ms. 1248 (33). Collection of the John Rylands University Library, Manchester.

copy. The works destined for Oxford, particularly during his terms as Slade Professor of Fine Art in 1869-79 and 1883-5, were clearly intended as models for students. For Whitelands, Ruskin tore out particularly attractive pages from medieval manuscripts so that the girls would have something charming to copy, and in Sheffield his intention was clearly to make study possible: 'I shall in all likelihood use the entire means at my disposal for the accumulation of the objects of study' he reports to the Guild in 1884.[71]

This evidence of activity rooted in a practical understanding of teaching stands in contrast to the idealistic appreciation of manual labour suggested by his written exhortation to Constance Oldham. Even taking account of the not uncommon contradictions in Ruskin's work, it appears that there is a schism between what was actually taking place at Walkley and Ruskin's expressed ideal of the primacy of manual activity. This highlights Ruskin's complex objectives for the Museum, which was to be simultaneously practical and yet offer a liberal education. In *Fors* in 1875, anticipating his 1877 letter to Oldham, Ruskin had emphasised the utilitarian purposes of the Guild and the Museum's central place within this framework: 'The store of the St George's Company is to be primarily of food; next of materials for clothing and covert; next of books and works of art.'[72] The list of elements which it appears Ruskin considers essential for life suggest that the Museum, with its works of art, was to be regarded as being as practical and necessary as food and clothes; that it was through the objects that a synthesis might occur which would allow an elision of the apparent divide between practical and ideal living. It was to be a source of

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[71] John Ruskin, Master's Report, 1884, in *Works*, 30, p.71.
[72] John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 58, October 1875, in *Works*, 28, p.428.

education and divine knowledge. Its objects were to act as exemplars of the natural

and man-made world and as symbols of wisdom and truth. In 1859, in his lecture

'The Two Paths', Ruskin had attempted to articulate his complex feelings about the

relationship between art, nature and society which help illuminate his aspirations for

the Museum:

> Wherever art is practised for its own sake, and the delight of the workman is in what he *does* and *produces,* instead of what he *interprets* or *exhibits,* - there art had an influence of the most fatal kind on brain and heart, and it issues, if long so pursued, in the *destruction both of intellectual power and moral principle;* whereas art, devoted humbly and self-forgetfully to the clear statement and record of the facts of the universe, is always helpful and beneficent to mankind, full of comfort, strength and salvation.[73]

The Museum was to exist not simply for its own sake but as 'a clear statement and

record of the facts of the universe' which would in turn create an impetus for social

improvement. In the search for a better society, the Museum was to fill an ambitious

role linking man's practical and spiritual needs.

These complex demands, I would argue, found their basis in the unique

conjunction of the visual and the textual which the St George's Museum represented.

While Ruskin's imagination was largely visual, it was expressed in writing – he drew

well, but made his mark as a critic rather than artist. This tension between the written

and the visual has been noted by a number of critics exploring the visual qualities,

the quasi-cinematic effects, of Ruskin's prose.[74] As these critics have examined,

Ruskin's writing is rich in visual detail, describing experiences which are physically

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[73] John Ruskin, 'The Two Paths', in *Works,* 16, p.268.
[74] There are a number of excellent works exploring Ruskin's preoccupation with sight, and his position in the evolution of theories of seeing from the Romantic sublime to Victorian modes of perception based on scientific discourse. See, for example, Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin and the Argument of the Eye* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982); Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

felt and which create a closeness with the reader based on shared visual experience. The intensity and precision of his prose is rooted in the material world and his writing returns again and again to things he has actually seen. What has been overlooked, however, is the place of the Museum in this hybrid construction. It is not only that Ruskin's literary imagination was embedded in visual experience; in addition, his collection of visual stimuli was profoundly literary in nature.

The need to see clearly is a repeated trope in Ruskin's writing, most passionately outlined in *Modern Painters III* (1853):

> the greatest thing a human soul ever does in the world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion, - all in one.[75]

It was a principle which he had evolved through personal experience. Some of the most evocative and immediate passages of Ruskin's autobiography *Praeterita* (1885-9) are those in which he recounts his growing appreciation of the importance of careful vision:

> I noticed a bit of ivy round a thorn stem...and proceeded to make a light and shade pencil study of it in my grey paper pocket-book, carefully, as if it had been sculpture...When it was done, I saw that I had virtually lost all my time since I was twelve years old, because no one had ever told me to draw what was really there!...I had the records of places, but had never seen the beauty of anything, not even of a stone – how much less of a leaf.[76]

Ruskin's museum experiment in Sheffield was directly linked to these demands for clear sight, demands which grew not only from an aesthetic but also from a moral and religious imperative – it is in the act of seeing that Ruskin connects the aesthetic and divine. By offering visitors the opportunity to see what he considered beautiful

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[75] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, III, in *Works*, 5, p.333.
[76] John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, in *Works*, 35, p.311.

things, Ruskin was aiming to do more than simply educate their taste. Poorly-designed, lazily-made objects – 'artificial stones, and imitation woods and bronzes' – would, Ruskin claimed in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), 'make us shallower in our understandings, colder in our hearts, and feebler in our wits'.[77] In contrast, close scrutiny of admirable things would allow a better general understanding which was linked to a closer engagement with humanity and, ultimately, a clearer vision of God.

Teaching the visual literacy which made this enlightenment possible was the role of the Museum. In an attempt to make evident the principles he had been espousing in his writing, Ruskin chose the objects and directed their arrangement to create visual links between the things on view: between different natural forms, and between the natural and manmade. The objects in the Museums were presented specifically to encourage the viewer to discover correspondences between, for example, a geological specimen and a careful watercolour rendition of a common tree. The metaphors of seeing which underpinned much of Ruskin's writing became actual in the visual displays of the Museum. The organisation of the objects, under his direct guidance, allowed visitors to see clearly, to make interpretative links between the things on show and the symbolic meanings they might represent.

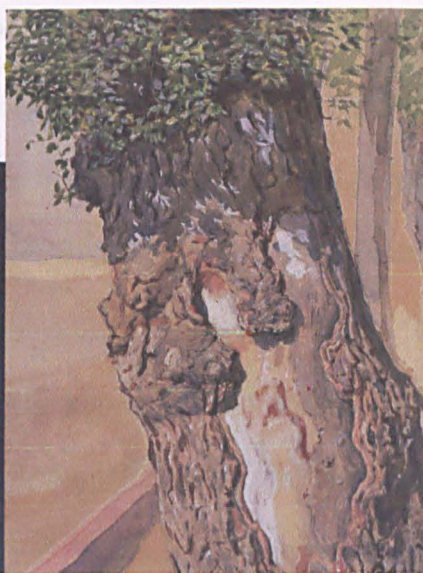[77] John Ruskin, *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, in *Works*, 8, p.77.

Fig. 4 (left): Emerald (uncut);
Collection of the Guild of St George, Ruskin Gallery, Sheffield.

Fig. 5: Thomas Matthews Rooke, *Study of an Elm Tree Trunk*, watercolour on paper, 1869.
Collection of the Guild of St George, Ruskin Gallery, Sheffield.

Yet Ruskin's act of seeing was not a simple one. Vision is commonly expressed metaphorically in his writing, creating a figurative complexity which relies for meaning on the links he creates between language and vision. Seeing becomes not just a physical but also a textual act. Elizabeth Helsinger, in her study of Ruskin's texts, emphasises the centrality of this elision between seeing and reading: 'Few critics have done as much as Ruskin to demonstrate, in his own prose as well as in his criticism of art and literature, exactly where and how seeing and reading converge.'[78] Ruskin's interests, Helsinger claims, lie in the complex, ambiguous reading acts. He sought an aesthetic experience by showing that painting is a space 'where language is visible or images readable'.[79] This convergence of seeing and reading, of the visual and the textual, was at the heart of Ruskin's style from his earliest writing. As Helsinger points out, the first edition of *Modern Painters* was

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[78] Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*, p.3.
[79] ibid.

printed in 1853 without illustrative plates: it was Ruskin's prose which presented the visual reality of the works of art he was discussing. Ruskin's attempts to encourage new ways of looking at the world, his desire to transfer his ability to see and make visual connections to his readers, took place entirely through textual description.

In *Praeterita*, Ruskin traces his own imaginative vision back to the most monotonous of visual acts, the childhood hours spent 'tracing the squares and comparing the colours of my carpet;- examining the knots in the wood of the floor, or counting the bricks in the opposite houses'.[80] Significantly, however, Ruskin records the episodes not merely to emphasise the aesthetic bleakness of his childhood and its lack of visual entertainment or stimulation, but to make the point that it was through prosaic acts of seeing that he was able to develop something more important, 'analytic power', which in turn, he suggests, laid the foundations for critical writing: 'patience in looking, and precision in feeling, which afterwards, with due industry, formed my analytic power.'[81] It is not the looking *per se* which is significant then, but the ability to analyse what is seen. The 'knots in the wood of the floor' are transformed through imaginative sight - and 'due industry' - into significant and meaningful objects.

At the very opening of *Modern Painters*, in what was to mark the beginning of a thirty year literary career, Ruskin emphasises the closeness of the visual and reading acts. He begins his discussion of works of art by asserting that painting is a language: 'Painting...with all its technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends, is nothing but a noble and expressive language, invaluable as the vehicle of thought, but

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[80] John Ruskin, *Praeterita* ed. by Kenneth Clark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.12.
[81] ibid, p.51.

by itself nothing.'[82] For a man embarking on a career as art critic, the assertion that painting is 'by itself nothing' is a bold, if not foolish, one; yet in it lies the seeds of the social and economic criticism which was to follow later. By asserting the primacy of thinking over its means of expression, by reducing painting, like language, to 'a vehicle of thought', Ruskin collapses the distinctions between the visual and the textual. What is important, he suggests, is not the particular mode of expression but the act of imaginative seeing which embraces both but, more significantly, is rooted in the ability of the viewer/reader to make and apply active connections, to interpret what is seen, to 'tell what it saw in a plain way'.

It is through this act of imaginative sight that Ruskin is able to move from art to social criticism since he sees both as being embedded in a vision which demands the incisive perception and interpretation of the reader to construct an argument. Looking at art, and looking at the social injustices of the economic system, are intrinsically linked in the reader/viewer's ability to take what is seen and transform it through imagination. With the act of seeing as the foundation for his examination of everything from the watercolours of J. M. W. Turner to the role of the workman, it is perhaps not surprising that the correspondences between seeing and reading are nowhere more evident than in Ruskin's exploration of 'The Nature of Gothic' in *The Stones of Venice* (1853) which sweeps broadly from a discussion of architectural style to the inequities of industrial England: 'We take no pleasure in the building provided for us, resembling that which we take in a new book,' he complains. His attempt to explain why the variety and occasional clumsiness of Gothic is superior to 'modern buildings' relies on an extended metaphor linking the architect's intentions

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[82] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters,* I, in *Works,* 3, p.87.

to the author's desire to create in the reader 'a kind of pleasure...other than a sense of propriety'. The good architect and the good author are, Ruskin argues, inspired by the same impulse to entertain; the building and the book can both be 'read'. He champions 'the idea of reading a building as we would read Milton or Dante, and getting the same kind of delight out of the stones as out of the stanzas'.[83]

It was a concept he had begun to articulate in the first volume of *Stones of Venice* (1851) when he had proclaimed it the 'duty' of public buildings to give up their meanings to an interested viewer as a text would to a reader; of 'churches, temples, public edifices' to be 'treated as books of history, to tell such history clearly and forcibly'.[84] By the end of the 'Nature of Gothic' this correspondence has become so embedded in Ruskin's thinking and writing that he posits the responsibility for the critical appreciation of a building firmly with 'the knowledge, feeling...[and] industry and perseverance of the reader', where 'the reader' is simultaneously the reader of the essay and the viewer of the building. He freely exhorts the reader to become a viewer, and the viewer to read what he sees: 'Read the sculpture. Preparatory to reading it, you will have to discover whether it is legible (and, if legible, it is nearly certain to be worth reading)'.[85] For Ruskin, effective 'reading' requires an active interpretation founded upon both close analysis and contextual awareness. As well as appreciating the visual qualities of, in this case, the sculpture, the viewer/reader must simultaneously look beyond its visual effect to interrogate the forms, figures and symbols which promote meaning.

In 1877, in the Preface to *St Mark's Rest,* Ruskin was to articulate an even

[83] John Ruskin, 'Nature of Gothic', in *Works,* 10, p.206.
[84] John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice,* I, in *Works,* 9, p.60.
[85] John Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', in *Works,* 10, p.269.

more extreme understanding of this relationship between the visual and the textual.

He had frequently referred to St Mark's throughout his writing career as a manuscript

which presented a narrative through its iconography, and which acted as:

> a vast illuminated missal, bound with alabaster instead of parchment, studded with porphyry pillars instead of jewels and written within and without in letters of enamel and gold.[86]

In *St Mark's Rest,* he re-emphasised the slippery boundaries between what could be

seen and what could be read: 'Great nations write their autobiographies in three

manuscripts – the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their

art'.[87] It is only the book of art which is, however, 'quite trustworthy', both words

and deeds permitting the potential of falsehood. Learning to read the evidence of the

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[86] John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, in *Works,* 10, p.112.
[87] John Ruskin, Preface to *St Mark's Rest*, in *Works,* 24, p.203.

visual world is, therefore, 'the most vital to our knowledge of any nation's life'.[88]

Ruskin was writing *St Mark's Rest* at a time when the St George's Museum was actively in formation. It is clearly, therefore, no coincidence that his commission of a number of meticulous paintings of St Mark's from the painter John Wharlton Bunney was intended to form the core of the visitors' experience. More significantly, however, Ruskin's preoccupation with the ability of the visual world to be 'read' and give up meanings to the diligent viewer can be seen to be fundamental to his conception of whole experiment. If, as Ruskin suggested in *St Mark's Rest,* the reading of literary texts, 'the book of their words', was no longer a reliable source of enlightenment, and was to be superceded by 'the book of their art', then the role of objects, and the Museum which displayed them, necessarily became increasingly important. Within the confines of the cottage at Walkley, Ruskin was creating another text, one which he intended would act as a visual prompt, allowing the visitor to discern new, potentially radical, meanings in the natural and manmade world.

Ruskin's writings and lectures of the 1860s, inspired by the hope of encouraging social change, had met with little success. His switch from discussion of art to economic criticism had alienated and even frightened much of his readership. In 1860, after the publication in the *Cornhill Magazine* of the first of the four essays which were later published together as *Unto This Last,* the editorial in *The Manchester Examiner and Times* gave expression to the fear and horror of the conservative middle classes occasioned by Ruskin's change of subject: 'If we do not crush him, his wild words will touch the springs of action in some hearts, and before

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[88] ibid.

we are aware, a moral floodgate may open and drown us all'.[89] It was not simply the subject matter which was terrifying – it was Ruskin's persuasive textual power, his 'wild words' which, it was implied, might spur previously sensible people into political opposition, touching the hidden 'springs of action' and releasing a flood of righteous indignation.

It was this horrified reception of *Unto This Last* which, Dinah Birch suggests, indicated to Ruskin that he was becoming 'seriously at odds with a readership that had welcomed his earlier works'.[90] Furthermore, the theme of the alarming power of Ruskin's writing was to be continued in reviews throughout the decade. Even when reviewing *Sesame and Lilies,* one of Ruskin's less politically-motivated works of the period, for the *Fortnightly Review in* 1865, Anthony Trollope begins by emphasising the persuasive power of his early writing:

> He has written to us on Art in language so beautiful, and with words so powerful, that he has carried men and women away with them in crowds, even before he has convinced their judgements or made intelligible to them the laws which he has inculcated. He has been as the fiddler in the tale, who, when he fiddled, made all men and women dance, even though they were men and women by nature very little given to exercise.[91]

Such fine prose is now seen to be wasted:

> The words are often arranged with surpassing beauty, with such a charm of exquisite verbal music that the reader is often tempted to forget that they have no definite tendency [...] The meaning of this, if you bolt the bran from the discourse, is simply nothing.[92]

What lingers, however, is the sense that readers may be 'tempted' to overlook any aberrations of argument due to the charm of the writing, that they may be 'carried

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[89] Leading article, *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 2 October 1860.
[90] Birch, *John Ruskin: Selected Writings*, p.xviii.
[91] Anthony Trollope, 'Sesame and Lilies,' *Fortnightly Review,* 2 (15 July 1865), pp.633-5.
[92] ibid.

away' in 'crowds' against their more sensible judgment.

The continued appreciation of the qualities of Ruskin's prose did nothing to mitigate his disappointment at the damning critical reception his political writing attracted. While he continued to value discursive volumes like *Sesame and Lilies* — 'In the one volume of *Sesame and Lilies* — nay, in the last forty pages of its central address[...]everything is told that I know of vital truth, everything urged that I see to be of needful act'[93] – he recognised that his writings were now 'reprobated in a violent manner [...] by most of the readers they met with'.[94] He was becoming increasingly isolated from the middle-class core audience which he had attracted with *Modern Painters*. Disillusioned, too, with lecturing in Oxford, and angered by what he regarded as the indifference of his wider readership to his political demands, he turned in 1871 with *Fors Clavigera*, ostensibly at least, to a new audience, 'The Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain'. In fact, the dedication of *Fors* reflected not so much a new audience as a diminishing one. Evidence suggests that most manual labourers were too poor or ignorant to subscribe to Ruskin's new venture. As Dinah Birch points out, each letter of *Fors* cost 7d (10d after 1874) and readers had to apply directly to Ruskin's publisher George Allen: Ruskin would allow no advertising, credits or discounts. Under such conditions, it is not surprising that, in fact, it was the loyal remnants of Ruskin's middle-class readership which formed the largest part of the *Fors* circulation.[95] The intimate prose and epistolary format of *Fors* begins to suggest writing responding to a private need rather than addressing a public

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[93] John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 57, September 1875, in *Works*, 28, p.402-416.
[94] John Ruskin, Preface, *Unto This Last*, I, in *Works*, 17, p.25.
[95] Dinah Birch, ed., *Fors Clavigera*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.xxxv. See, for example, the Abercrombie Archive at the Ruskin Library, University of Lancaster, which notes the wealthy William Abercrombie among the subscription list held by George Allen, Ruskin's publisher.

audience. Ruskin's prose was adapting itself to the different demands of a small readership, and demonstrates not only a growing disbelief in the desire of his readers to create political change but also increasing doubt as to whether they exist at all. As Helsinger suggests: 'part of the sense of intimacy comes from Ruskin's growing conviction that while he is talking no one is listening'.[96]

Just as *Fors* expressed a growing disillusion with middle-class readers, so the St George's Museum was to be distinctly aimed at working men. It was to be an innovative way of speaking to this newly-important audience. It is significant that the seeds of the Museum were to grow out of this period when Ruskin's writing was seen to be failing. It was a time when his words was being ignored and denied. The ability of his prose to inspire readers to make the associative, instinctive connections which would reveal meaning was being undermined. Moreover, a draft report to the Guild, subsequently unused, suggests that Ruskin was beginning to feel that all writing, not only his own, was inadequate in conveying meaning which might inspire political reform from its readers:

> Much good work of this kind has been already done by able novelists, but always with a collateral, and too often a principal, view to the mere excitement of the reader, and filling of their own purses; while the essential truths of their relation are disguised by picturesque treatment, and rendered incredible by vulgar exaggeration.[97]

His exploration of the inherent lack in even the most popular contemporary writing goes on to criticize, for example, Dickens's use of Tom-All-Alone's in *Bleak House* which, though it might be 'recognised at once by any police officer in London, Liverpool, Paris or Marseilles', still fails to make a practical impression 'on the

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[96] Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder,* p.283.
[97] John Ruskin, 'Old Report,' in 'Additional Passages Relating to St George's Guild', in *Works,* 30, p.155.

reader's mind' because:

> the public know very well that baronets' wives do not usually die on the steps of a city churchyard, and accordingly put the whole scene aside as a piece of dramatic fiction.[98]

With the power of the written word faltering, then, the complex system of symbols which Ruskin had used throughout his writing career to carry meaning were concentrated instead into a real collection of things. It was to be through imaginative viewing that visitors to the Museum would read the messages writing was now failing to convey.

While his enthusiasm for the Museum experiment at this time can be seen as the result of an increasing lack of confidence in the efficacy of the written word, Ruskin's habits as writer are not easily detached from the creation of the collection, however. Just as Ruskin's texts are saturated with visual references, so the Museum was steeped in a written tradition. Unlike most other collections, where the objects are acquired first and written interpretation is developed subsequently, the Guild of St George collection emerged first on paper. It grew from Ruskin's printed proposals in *Fors,* before it had a physical embodiment, and was propounded through a series of reports to the Guild, letters to the press and written statements. Ruskin rarely visited Sheffield, and most of the business was conducted by letter. In April 1876 he records in his diary a rare visit to the city. He says little of the Museum, however, recording only a meeting of 'two hours and a half of pleasant talk', but much, as always, of the weather: 'yellow fog; plashing rain'.[99] Later, when discussions were taking place with the Sheffield Corporation in 1881 and again in the mid 1880s about

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[98] Ibid.

[99] John Ruskin, Diary entry for 28th April 1876. Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse, *The Diaries of John Ruskin 1874-1889* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p.896.

the proposed expansion of the Museum and its relocation to new, larger premises, Ruskin was often abroad and the negotiations were inevitably – and rather unreliably – conducted by letter. He depended on written instructions to Swan, the curator, listing his display requirements, as we have already seen, in an extensive correspondence. Nor were texts themselves to be overlooked. Ruskin's plan for the Museum pivoted around the core of a library, providing books for study and situating his visual objects clearly in a context bound to the written word. Much of the Guild's money was spent on acquiring illuminated manuscripts for the collection which were valued as much for their historical meaning and 'book' status as for their decoration. The 'Queen of Scots Missal', for example, was acquired by Ruskin for the collection in 1881 for £500: 'an extravagant price but I think Sheffield will be a little proud of having saved it from going to America'.[100]

Because so much of the Museum's business was directed at arm's length and in writing, the role of Henry Swan, as curator and champion of the Ruskin ideal, was critical in the creation and interpretation of the text Ruskin was trying to create. As Cook and Wedderburn note in the introduction to their *Collected Works,* it was 'largely due' to Swan that the Museum was established in Sheffield at all.[101] It was at Swan's invitation that Ruskin first visited the city to meet a group of working men, a visit which inspired his announcement in *Fors* that a Museum was to be established. In addition, Swan himself is described as 'very much of a character' whose personality was evident to visitors: 'it was impossible to visit the little Museum at Walkley without carrying away a vivid remembrance of him'. Most importantly,

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[100] John Ruskin, Letter to Henry Swan (30 November 1881). Rosenbach Collection.
[101] 'Introduction', in *Works,* 30, pp.xliii-xliv.

however, Swan was a 'most devoted disciple of Ruskin'.[102] His role as intermediary between Ruskin and the visitor was essential in ensuring a 'correct' interpretation of the collection: the physical reality of the objects, like words on a page, had the potential to suggest a variety of meanings. An obituary of Swan in 1889 emphasised not only his own eccentric characteristics but, more significantly, his devotion to Ruskinian goals. The terms it employs are significant in this discussion of the interchange between seeing and writing – Swan himself is described as being a Ruskin text: 'it was often remarked that to listen to his descriptions was like reading a few pages of Ruskin'.[103] Later curators, too, it is worth noting, continued in the loyal protection of the undiluted Ruskinian message. Writing the introduction to the *Descriptive Catalogue of the Library and Print Room of The Ruskin Museum, Sheffield* in 1890, Swan's successor, William White, was adamant that the meaning of the works in the collection was not to be undermined or confused by ad hoc collecting:

> it is further intended that only such works as legitimately come within the scope of Mr Ruskin's system of general culture, and which serve to illustrate his teaching, shall at any time be admitted into the collection as proper to the institution.[104]

The efforts of Ruskin and his curators to establish a coherent display of objects which allowed for a 'correct' interpretation, placed the emphasis firmly back on the visitor. Presented with carefully-selected visual prompts, it was the visitor's responsibility to glean from them an approved set of meanings. The identity of the Museum as some kind of visual text required the visitor to fulfil the personal

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[102] ibid.

[103] 'The Faithful Steward of the Ruskin Museum by one who knew him,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 April 1889, qtd in Janet Barnes, *Ruskin in Sheffield*, p.13.

[104] *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Library and Print Room of The Ruskin Museum, Sheffield* (London: George Allen, 1890), p.vii. Guild of St George Archive, Sheffield City Archives.

relationship with Ruskin which elsewhere had been provided by the reader. Setting up this intimate relationship through objects, Ruskin not only demanded of his visitors that they were sufficiently educated and appropriately sensitive to respond, but also that they responded in the right way. It was not enough simply to enjoy looking; as Ruskin's notice on the Museum wicket gate suggested, he expected a serious moral and aesthetic commitment, a covenant which would bind the visitor to his part in the museological experiment. The suitable visitor would find meaning both in individual objects and in their relationship to the rest of the collection; he would use the opportunity for close observation as the starting-point for social and moral discovery.

So, for example, a pencil drawing of an aspen tree could be linked to the painted copy of the recumbent fifteenth-century effigy of Ilaria di Caretto from the cathedral at Lucca. In *Praeterita* Ruskin was able to articulate the connections in words: 'the sleeping Ilaria [...] expressed [the] harmonies of line which I saw in an instant were under the same laws as the river wave, and the aspen branch'.[105] Now the Museum visitor too was invited to 'see' these common laws through the juxtaposition of actual objects:

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[105] *Praeterita*, in *Works*, 35, p.349.
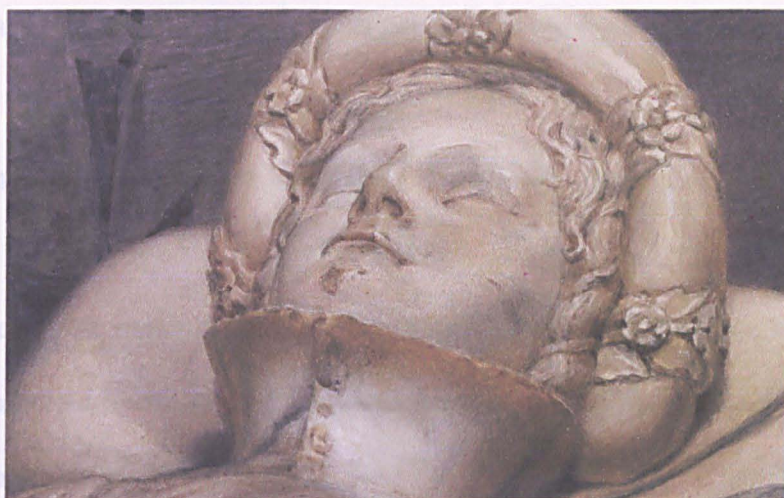
Fig. 7: William Gershom Collingwood, *The Head of Ilaria di Caretto, from the Tomb by Jacopo della Quercia*, watercolour and bodycolour on paper, 1882.
Collection of the Guild of St George, Ruskin Gallery, Sheffield.

Fig. 8 (left): Frank Randal, *Study of a Capital, St. Lazare, Avallon*, watercolour on paper, 1882.
Collection of the Guild of St George, Ruskin Gallery, Sheffield.

Fig. 9: J. C. Armytage after John Ruskin, *Aspen Unidealized, Modern Painters*, Volume 4, plate 28.
Intaglio Print on paper, c.1856.
Collection of the Guild of St George, Ruskin Gallery, Sheffield.

Having made the visual connections, the visitor could then move on yet further to a better appreciation of moral imperatives. The aesthetic pleasure inherent in the graceful lines of the natural form and the medieval tomb were just the starting point

for appreciating 'a modesty and severity which read the laws of nature by the light of virtue.'[106]

Many of the objects on display in the Museum had personal meanings for Ruskin. He had a passionate attachment to Ilaria, for example, who came to represent for him 'the purest standards of breathing womanhood' and the meanings of nature and virtue inherent in the painted copy in the Museum were intrinsically bound to his individual interpretation.[107] While visitors were not expected to engage in speculation on Ruskin's personal life, the St George's Museum, with its emphasis on education and learning, implied that an enlightened knowledge of the world relied on contact with Ruskin. This could take place through familiarity with his writing, or through the mediation of the curator, or it could happen through the objects which, chosen and interpreted by Ruskin, operated in place of both himself and his texts, displaying to those with the required visual literacy his moral and aesthetic messages. The collection offered Ruskin's personal guidance through the complexities of visual cultural history. The visitor should not – indeed could not, if the experiment was to succeed – respond rudely to Ruskin's direction as author and guide. Fortunately, few, if any, of the Museum visitors seem to have challenged Ruskin's role as director, or the interpretation of what they were being shown. Swan was able to report proudly:

> in the museum there are many things which prove charming in the eyes of the rough and hard workmen and we've not had a single instance of anything but most pleasing and reverent attention – nothing approaching even in the slightest degree too rude or flippant behaviour in them.[108]

This was very much in contrast to reports of behaviour at Sheffield's municipal

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[106] ibid.
[107] ibid.
[108] Qtd in Morley, *John Ruskin Late Works*, p.12.

museum and art gallery. In a letter to the editor of the *Sheffield Independent,* one art lover felt forced to complain of:

> An invasion of Sheffield roughs of both sexes last Sunday pm...some hundreds of the worst played at gymnastics over the seats, and afterwards, with girls at their sides, made a promenade of the galleries to the annoyance of all who were anxious to see the paintings.[109]

The importance of the visitor to the functioning of the St George's Museum as a Ruskinian document is intrinsically linked to the distinctive, and fluctuating, relationship Ruskin had shared with his readers during his writing career. His conception of the ideal visitor springs not so much from a survey of museum habits, as from an absorption in literary ones – the confusion which arises about the visitor's identity (even his possible existence) reflects the difficulty, noted by many critics, in Ruskin's attempt to pin down an identity for his reader. This is not a confusion resulting simply from the diminishing response to, and readership of, his later writing: even in the earliest volumes of *Modern Painters,* for example, Ruskin vacillates in his relationship to those for whom he writes, and appears confused about the identity of his supposed reader. The language of sage and prophet locates him at one moment in the preaching stance of the evangelical teacher addressing the erring innocent. At another moment he invokes the traditions of satire or romantic poetry to address the educated and cultured middle classes. In some passages he becomes a spokesperson for artists assuming a rebellious role against the aesthetic establishment; later he shares his knowledge and authority with a reader whom he addresses with the familiarity of the intimate. Ruskin's complex prose oscillates in tone as he attempts to express his plurality as author to an elusive and changing

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[109] 'To the editor', *Sheffield Independent,* 11 August 1887, p.6.

imagined reader. Faced with the equal plurality potentially expressed through objects, it is not surprising that Ruskin should also demonstrate a confusion in his identification of the museum visitor.

Much of this uncertainty about the character of the visitor and Ruskin's instinctive recourse to an ideal construct, springs from the visitor's unique habitation of a role as both spectator and reader, as viewer of the objects on display and consumer of the meanings they represent. The distinctions between viewer and reader which are elided in Ruskin's texts, are further collapsed in the Museum. Helsinger comments that Ruskin's desire, as expressed in his texts, for the viewer to learn to read what is seen adopts the genre of travel writing which breaks down the differences between spectator and reader. Volume two of *The Stones of Venice*, for example, opens with the picture of a traveller and a view of 'the quiet village where he was to rest, scattered among the meadows besides its valley streams'.[110] This motif is woven throughout the text and Ruskin asks the reader to accompany him on a number of very personal, and visual, journeys. He is encouraged to:

> imagine himself for a little time in a quiet English cathedral town, and walk with me to the west front of its cathedral. Let us go together up the more retired street, ...into the inner private-looking road or close, where nothing goes in but the carts of the tradesmen...And so, taking care not to stand on the grass, we will go along the straight walk to the west front, and there stand for a time.[111]

It is not enough simply to appreciate the picture, however. The spectator/reader must: 'Think for a little while of that scene, and the meaning of all its small formalisms'.[112]

The Museum visitor, being encouraged by Ruskin to make a personal journey

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[110] John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, in *Works*, 10, p.3.
[111] John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, in *Works*, 10, p.78-9.
[112] ibid.

prompted by the objects rather than by a text, is equally asked to make simultaneous sense of the multiple meanings of the things on display.

These multiple meanings are not confined to one object's relationship to another, but also embrace the layers of interpretation potentially evoked by a single object, so creating a complex network of meanings throughout the Museum. With this in mind, for example, Ruskin collected and displayed medieval illuminated manuscripts to demonstrate the level of craftsmanship of the scribes and decorators: 'the pen lines are always superb, and the colour delicate and simple; and all study of Gothic sculpture must begin by obtaining accurate knowledge of the forms of ornamentation developed in the twelfth century'.[113] In addition to learning to appreciate the aesthetic features of the manuscript, however, the visitor was asked simultaneously to read the symbolism in the decoration – the religious messages couched in a visual language of flowers, mythic beasts and drawn motifs. The status of the manuscripts as books of prayer added another layer of meaning for the diligent viewer. Continuing on his metaphorical journey, the visitor is then asked to understand the moral quality of the individuals and societies which had proved themselves sophisticated and morally sound enough to produce such works of art. The manuscripts acted, Ruskin claimed, as the 'most important evidence of character'.[114] Historians (and by implication student visitors to the Museum) would be unable to 'estimate, or even observe, with accuracy' any elements of national character without an understanding of the manuscripts' 'modes of structural and

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[113] John Ruskin, 'The Ruskin Art Collection. Notes on Educational Series', in *Works*, 21, p.137.
[114] John Ruskin, 'The Pleasures of England', Oxford Lecture 1884, in *Works*, 33, p.424.

ornamental craftsmanship'.[115] The aesthetic, and even religious, learning prompted by the manuscript as object was not sufficient if it did not also suggest a wider world-view.

Lindsay Smith, in her work on Victorian photography, painting and poetry, also explores the idea of the optical journeys Ruskin encourages, but she takes the argument a step further. Smith argues that Ruskin requires any distorting self between the teacher Ruskin and the viewed object to be eliminated so that the spectator/reader might be completely receptive to the Ruskinian message. In texts like *Modern Painters* the viewer thus becomes unimportant and even invisible:

> The result is an inevitably strange hybrid: a desire for an invisible man, a poetic identity who is newly aware visually, but whose intelligence absents itself and whose educated eye avoids self-assertion.[116]

Although Smith is dealing with Ruskin's relationship to art (particularly photography) and its examination in his written texts, her point may be seen to illuminate, partly at least, the confusion within Ruskin's conception of the Museum visitor. Ruskin implies, she claims, 'that a viewer who strives to annihilate the self automatically paves the way for an alignment of clear vision and requisite feeling'.[117] If, as Smith argues therefore, such a union of 'clear vision' and 'requisite feeling' occurs most effectively when the viewer suspends intellectual engagement and avoids asserting a personal vision, then it is perhaps not surprising that Ruskin struggles to pin down an actuality for the visitor. The ideal visitor has, in Smith's terms, become 'an invisible man'.

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[115] ibid.
[116] Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry: the Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.25-6.
[117] Ibid., p.40.

While such a reading is tempting, however, Smith's bleak view of the total abnegation of the intelligent self in favour of the Ruskinian vision is, I think, not wholly appropriate to a consideration of his relationship to the St George's Museum. The Museum was, above all, a positive, affirmative experiment with the clear intention of inspiring, improving and informing the intellectual life of the working man, rather than reducing it. If Smith's argument were applied directly to Ruskin's artisan, for example, he would be in danger of reduction to the 'animated tool' status from which Ruskin apparently desired to deliver him. Ruskin clearly had difficulties, however, as we have seen, with grounding his ideals for the Museum – which he had been formulating through his imagination and expressing through his writing – in an adequate reality. Although Smith's argument taken as a whole and applied to the museum threatens to distort the relationship between Ruskin and his collection, her contention that Ruskin wanted nothing to intervene between his act of seeing and the object of his sight does highlight the immediacy of the relationship between Ruskin and his things. Ruskin had established a personal collection, with his own funds and under his passionate direction. He had an intimate and particular relationship to the objects in the Museum, all of which he had commissioned, chosen or owned. Each object was specifically selected not only on its aesthetic merits but on the basis of the contribution it could make, through its connections to the rest of the collection, to communicating elements of Ruskin's imaginative activity which previously had been communicated through the text. The collection synthesised Ruskin's personal worldview and made it public and legible. The unreality, the invisibility, of the reader/viewer which Smith proposes, lends emphasis to Ruskin's ultimately personal relationship to the collection and the slippery identity of the Museum, located

somewhere between, and incorporating both, Ruskin's imagined ideal and the more prosaic 'mountain home' at Walkley.

In their introduction to the St George's Museum, Cook and Wedderburn sound a note of caution for those investigating it:

> In examining the existing museum we must bear in mind one or two considerations. The first is a distinction [...] between the real and the ideal. In the pages of *Fors* and in the Reports collected in the present volume Ruskin is describing sometimes a museum as he conceived it and as he would have ordered it, if the public had come forward to help him; and at other times the museum as it was actually ordered at Walkley.[118]

The Museum has no single identity – it is both the imaginary ideal as Ruskin 'conceived it' and the practical experiment 'as it was actually ordered at Walkley'. Just as Ruskin's prose adopts a variety of Ruskinian narrators addressing a shifting conception of the reader, so this most literary of visual experiments adopts a multiple identity which confounds easy analysis. It was simultaneously a temple to the Muses, a storehouse of divine wisdom, an education facility for the working man, and a personal collection inspired by 'what is lovely in the life of Nature, and heroic in the life of Men'.[119] It was a practical resource, a tiny stone 'pillbox' of accumulated things, but it made possible a leap into an imagined 'panorama' beyond the confines of the Museum. Ruskin's collection was a visual experiment, a manifesto document for new ways of seeing, but the visual objects on display were only part of it. As with all collectors, the overarching coherence of the collection remained embedded in his imagination. Depending on the nature of the individual collector, this underlying rationale is expressed to the viewer/visitor more or less successfully: for Ruskin

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[118] *Works,* 30, p.xlix.
[119] John Ruskin, 'On the Old Road: A Collection of Miscellaneous Essays and Articles. A Museum or Picture Gallery', in *Works,* 34, p.251.

many elements were articulated through his texts, giving the Museum and its jumble of potentially unrelated objects, cohesion and meaning. In other cases, an individual's collection might be given structure and logic by its place in a wider Museum context and the interpretation of later curators. The collection displayed at the St George's Museum was unusually successful in exposing Ruskin's ways of thinking but was in many ways simply an expression, on a larger scale, of an impulse which was receiving increased attention during this period. My last chapter explores the machinations of the collector and the Victorian fascination with this most personal of occupations.

6. Objects of Desire:
Collecting Things and the Challenge of Identity.

I have a great respect for things! One's self — for other people —
is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's clothes,
the books one reads, the company one keeps — these things are all
expressive. [1]

The act of collecting has long been recognised as expressing basic human desires. Collecting creates a visible link to the invisible, and often unspoken, aspirations and beliefs of the collector; the collection acts as an anthropological indicator of identity. We express ourselves through the things we collect. By the seventeenth-century, dictionaries were already articulating the link between objects and the desires which drive the collector. The French *Dictionnaire Universel* (1690), for example, used the term 'amateur' (lover of things) to describe one who enjoyed '*des curiosités*' and '*des Beaux-Arts*', creating a linguistic connection between the desire associated with love (*amour*) and the cherishing of beautiful objects. In the 1694 *Dictionnaire de l'Acadèmie Françoise,* the curiosity which underpins collecting was being expressed in terms more common to romantic or carnal pleasure, as '*désir, passion de voir*'.[2] At the same time, the English use of the verb 'to collect' was drawing further comparisons between the acquisition of things and the exploration of self. By 1610 'collected' had come to mean composed, self-possessed, a way of defining and expressing identity. In *The Winter's Tale* (1611), for example,

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[1] Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* ed. by Nicola Bradbury (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.223. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.
[2] For further discussion of early definitions of collecting terms see Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities. Paris and Venice, 1500-1800* (London: Polity Press, 1990).

Antigonus describes his terrifying encounter with a figure 'in pure white robes' which 'affrighted' him. He chooses 'collect' as the verb to describe the reassertion of the thinking self after panic: 'I did in time collect myself'.[3]

It was not only linguistic evolution, however, which reflected a growing interest in the activities and motives of the collector. Socially, too, collecting was becoming increasingly visible. By 1683, John Tradescant's collection of ancient objects was already so celebrated and had so outgrown his London house that the Ashmolean Museum was purpose-built in Oxford to house it. The numbers of collectors following, albeit more modestly, in Tradescant's footsteps stimulated the foundation of the Society of Antiquaries in London in 1717 to celebrate the act of collecting and to create a network for those engaged in it, the 'eccentric lover and collector of objects'.[4] By the middle of the nineteenth century, collecting was well established as gentleman's pastime, scientific enquiry or financial speculation. Social and intellectual status could be read from the sculpture galleries of the travelled gentry or the carefully-classified collections of the natural historian or antiquarian, and there was a small but significant network of English house museums, making manifest the collecting passion to a select public. In 1856, Henry Cole pronounced 'the taste for collecting' to be 'almost universal amongst educated people',[5] and just over a decade later *The Graphic* proclaimed that 'this is the collecting age'.[6] When Serena Merle probes the entangled relationships between people and objects in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the collector had achieved a new visibility across the social

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[3] William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale, III. iii. 43.*

[4] Clive Wainwright, *The Romantic Interior: The British Collector at Home 1750-1850* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p.5.

[5] *The Catalogue of the Soulages Collection, compiled by J.C. Robinson, with contributions from Henry Cole* (London, 1856). Archive of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

[6] *The Graphic,* 1:1 (4 December 1869), p.2.

classes which was being reflected in a greater presence in literary production. As Serena's perceptive evaluation of the elision between the material and the personal demonstrates, by the late 1880s there was an increasing awareness of the complex and subtle relationships between people and the things they collected about them.

In 1835, Gustav Waagen, art historian and director of the Royal Gallery in Berlin, remarked that what was noticeable in England and 'virtually unknown elsewhere in Europe' was the English taste for showing off their collections in their homes, rather than confining them to separate specialist galleries: 'they like to <u>live</u> surrounded by their pictures and antiquities,' he marvelled.[7] Yet it was not only ancient works of art which were taking their places in people's houses. In the same year, a Parliamentary Select Committee on the Arts and Manufactures, to which Waagen gave evidence, examined Britain's role in the manufacture and production of modern decorative objects and explored ways of boosting the market for these new pieces and 'extending taste and a knowledge... among the people generally'.[8] By the middle of the century, this nascent interest had developed into a more long-term and significant shift in collecting habits. Reporting in 1848 on the sale of the bankrupt property of Richard Grenville, 2nd Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, for example, *The Times* noted that alongside 'the pictures, marbles and bronzes' there was a collection of 'curiosities, china, [and] glass'.[9] It was an indication that modern, manufactured, decorative objects were beginning to appear even in the country house

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[7] Gustav Waagen, *Works of Art and Artists in England,* translated into English by H. E. Lloyd (London: Murray, 1838), qtd in Hermann, *The English as Collectors: A Documentary Chrestomathy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), p.6.
[8] Michael Conforti, 'The Idealist Enterprise and the Applied Arts', in *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum* ed. by Malcolm Baker and Brenda Richardson (London: V&A publications, 1997), p.26.
[9] *The Times*, 14 August 1848, p.4.

collection; apparently ephemeral objects were now sitting next to 'heirlooms...and the memorials of many great persons'.[10]

Meanwhile in the popular middle-class mind, paintings, sculpture and archaeological or antiquarian treasures, were being supplanted by more affordable displays of contemporary tableware, fine silverware, ceramics and manufactured souvenirs. With the growing taste for conspicuous display in the fashionable town-houses of the middle classes, came an increasing desire to own a variety of decorative objects which might impart social status and locate the owner within the network of educated, culturally-ambitious bourgeoisie. As the middle classes grew in both numbers and confidence, so too, as we have seen, did the desire for ways to display social aspiration and success. With increased means and opportunities to collect, but without the knowledge of, or interest in, more traditional art forms, the acquisitive middle classes were turning their attention to easily accessible objects.

The growing popularity of modern manufactures as a valid focus for the attention of the collector was not only a result of the rise in profile of the decorative object in showcases like the townhouse or the Great Exhibition, however, but also, as Clive Wainwright discusses in his extensive study of early nineteenth-century collecting, a result of a dramatic rise in prices and a shortage of supply of antiquarian material around the middle of the century.[11] In addition, at the same time as traditionally collectable objects were becoming more scarce, an increasing number of people were being drawn to collecting as a response to growing evidence that it constituted a shrewd financial investment. In February 1855 the collection of Ralph

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[10] ibid.
[11] See Wainwright, *The Romantic Interior.*

Bernal, a barrister and MP and perhaps the most active English collector of things in the early nineteenth century, was sold at Christies in 4294 lots for very slightly under £63,000 and a year later the eclectic collection of Samuel Rogers - containing everything from Egyptian antiquities to contemporary English painting and illuminated manuscripts - was sold by Sotheby's in a sale lasting twenty days and netting £45,188. Sales were reported in all the newspapers and the Bernal auction launched a satirical series in *Punch* celebrating the boom in collecting:

> The accounts of the enormous quantity of money which is being obtained for...crockery have (as we expected, and indeed said would be the case) stimulated the ambition of great numbers of "Collectors" all over the country.[12]

With the market for antiquities becoming increasingly closed, those with the desire and means to collect were forced to consider innovative strategies which included the collecting of 'crockery' that had rarely, in the past, been deemed worthy of attention. It also made relatively recent objects desirable and launched what Wainwright describes as 'pioneer collectors of Georgian objects'.[13]

Wainwright ends his study in 1850 with the recognition that his cut-off date sees the beginning of a period when popular collecting was becoming increasingly widespread and the focus of the collector's desire increasingly cosmopolitan: 'Many more people were collecting, and they were purchasing a far wider range of objects than before...By the 1880s everyone was being encouraged to incorporate a few curiosities into their houses'.[14] This recognition that the thirty years between 1850 and 1880 saw a significant increase in the numbers of people collecting, a change in

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[12] *Punch*, 28 (June 1855), reports on the Bernal sale ('The Collection Mania,' p.129) and parodies the Bernal collection with 'The Aarons Collection'. (p.143). In a typical piece of latent anti-Semitism the Jewish Aaron's desire for financial profit is directly linked to his desire for collecting.
[13] Wainwright, *The Romantic Interior*, p.272.
[14] ibid., pp.286-7.

the nature of the material collected and a growing visibility of collectors and their objects within everyday social intercourse, is evident too from contemporary anecdotal evidence. *The Graphic's* discussion of collecting in 1869 traces the habit to the widespread encouragement given to the activity in schools and identifies collecting with financial prudence and investment.[15] Looking back from 1890 on the period from 1860, Lady Charlotte Schreiber (1812-1895), a dedicated and successful collector who specialised in ceramics and left much of her vast collection to the South Kensington Museum, traces in her journal the evolution from ignorance and unconcern to a frenzy of activity around household things:

> I know from experience that, amongst the ordinary dealers, ignorance was the prevailing characteristic... Nobody wanted Old Sheffield Plate, Pinchbeck, old English jewellery, needlework pictures, old English glass, pewter, Staffordshire ware, excluding Wedgwood, old steel, brass etc., all those things in fact about which every man, woman and child seems to have gone mad in the present day.[16]

Her son and editor, Montague Guest, also notes the rapid rise in prices during the latter half of the nineteenth century, 'the amounts she paid' appearing in retrospect as bargain buying, the low mid-century prices being 'astounding to the present-day ideas and notions of the value of things'.[17]

Paradoxically, however, in addition to increasing the monetary value of an object, its inclusion in a collection also, temporarily at least, removed it from the

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[15] *The Graphic*, 1.1 (4 December 1869).

[16] *Journals of Lady Charlotte Schreiber by Mr Montague Guest* (London and New York: John Lane, 1911), pp.xxviii-xxix. Lady Schreiber also collected glass and enamels, and had well-catalogued collections of fans and playing cards which were given to the British Museum. Her choice of objects can certainly be read as gendered: Moira Vincentelli notes, for example, that china was often regarded as personal rather than family property, and was thus often bequeathed through female descendents, and came to be associated with female spaces. It was, therefore, also regarded as more appropriate for female collecting. See *Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[17] ibid, p.xxix.

demands of the marketplace to invest it instead with personal meanings. So by the late 1870s collections were increasingly viewed as both a sound financial investment and a significant expression of the self. This dual significance was given added emphasis by the emergence of the network of regional museums, frequently founded on the private collections of individual benefactors, which contributed to the legitimisation of collecting activity by emphasising the wider social and cultural contexts of the objects. Between 1865 and the end of the century, the museum network extended to almost every provincial city, making collecting publicly visible and bolstering the reputations of those whose names were attached to the key collections on display. At Nottingham Castle Museum, for example, private collectors had been eager to give or loan objects long before the museum was settled in its permanent site in 1878 – the first annual report by the energetic curator Harry Wallis lists a number of collections received from 1872 onwards. By March 1872 there was already an established Art Exhibition Loan Sub Committee which met regularly to consider offers of loans and gifts and which, perhaps more significantly, was actively approaching known local collectors for support. The minutes of the meeting of 18th March 1872, for example, record that the pottery collection of Mr Simons; the gem collection of Mr Arthur Wells; the china collections of Mr Preston and Mr. Rainbow and the lace owned by Mssrs. Grocock and Messrs. Heymann were all being targeted for the new museum.[18] It was a collector, too, W. G. Ward, mayor of Nottingham and friend of Henry Cole, who was the driving force behind the creation of the museum. In its review of the 1872 exhibition, the *Nottingham Daily Guardian* emphasised the validation its existence accorded to Ward in his municipal

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[18] Unpublished archive material from Nottingham Castle Museums, reference CA CM 60/4, p.22-23.

role. 'The legacy of Mr. W. G Ward will be memorable for many years to come,' it began, 'from the fact that within his period of holding office there was established in Nottingham a permanent museum for art and industrial works', while Ward's own collecting activities were legitimised by the display of a number of items from his personal collection of saltglaze stoneware.[19]

It is hardly surprising that the growing fascination with the activity of the collector and the role of the collection as a site for personal and social meanings began to encourage fictional interest as the century progressed. While novels from earlier periods had included descriptions of objects, usually within their domestic setting, there was rarely a sense of a complete collection, or its collector, making a significant contribution to plot or characterisation. At the end of *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), for example, Sheridan refers to Sidney's abundant array of domestic things and highlights the process of exchange which links them to social progress. There is little sense of 'the collection', however; rather Sidney is happy to give objects away to impress influential friends:

> He has added to my store of china to-day (of which I have already an abundance) a pair of most magnificent jars, above four feet high, which he values at a one hundred and fifty pounds; these, with an entire service of the finest nankeen china, and a most beautiful Persian carpet, I have set apart as a present for Lady V-[20]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, fiction writers were beginning to develop an interest in objects beyond their role as items for exchange or indicators of social status. These meanings remained, but in addition the complex impulses of the collector, and his subtle relationship to his objects, were becoming a subject worthy

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[19] *Nottingham Daily Guardian*, 18 May 1872.
[20] Frances Sheridan, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, ed. by Patricia Koster and Jean Coates Cleary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp.378-9.

of attention. With *The Old Curiosity Shop* in 1840-1, for example, Dickens explored not only the ability of Nell's grandfather to make a living from trading things, but, more significantly, the 'habit of allowing impressions to be made upon us by external objects, which should be produced by reflection alone, but which, without such visible aids, often escape us'.[21] Dickens's articulation of the value of 'visible aids' in inspiring profound emotional responses represents a more sophisticated fictional relationship between objects and their owners which reflects the increasing visibility of actual collectors and the growing fascination with their activity.

In 1860, Wilkie Collins was to go a step further when the municipal impulses which urged the beneficent collectors of Nottingham to donate their objects to the city were revisited in his presentation of Frederick Fairlie, the sickly, bad-tempered presiding spirit of Limmeridge House in *A Woman in White* (1860). The motives of Fairlie as collector are central to his characterisation and his 'last caprice', reports Marian Halcombe in her narrative, is to assure his place in posterity by according his lifelong obsession public sanction at the Mechanics' Institute in Carlisle, keeping two photographers

> incessantly employed in producing sun-pictures of all the treasures and curiosities in his possession. One complete copy of the collection...is to be presented to the Mechanics' Institution in Carlisle, mounted on the finest cardboard, with ostentatious red-letter inscriptions underneath..."In the possession of Frederick Fairlie, Esquire."[22]

The working man, Fairlie's gift implies, would benefit as much from an education in the values of the secluded gentry as in the aesthetics of European culture. The

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[21] Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p.20.

[22] Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* ed. by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.176. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

'ostentatious red-letter inscriptions' are designed to impress, and to assert Fairlie's identity as both owner and social superior. For Collins, the collection has become something to be scoured for meaning, a value-laden signifier of character rather than a neutral activity, while the collector has become a curious eccentric worthy of fictional interest.

Collins's characterisation of Frederick Fairlie presents the collector as withdrawn, antisocial and strange. The collection is a place of refuge, both literally - it is displayed in his darkened bedroom - and psychologically. Encapsulated in a self-created environment, the impact of disturbances from the world beyond the collection is mediated and reduced by the collector's intense relationship to his objects. This sense of the collection as a detached, self-contained place apart seems to have fascinated novelists, whatever the nature of the objects. Natural history collections, for example, apparently sites of scientific enquiry and progress, are used instead by George Eliot to explore the isolation of the collector and again become places of retreat. In *Felix Holt* (1866) Mr Transome, disempowered, ignored and cuckolded by his wife, immerses himself in the classification and rearrangement of his insect specimens. The collection seems directly to compensate Transome for the intimacy he misses: 'Mr Transome had always had his beetles, but Mrs Transome -? It was not easy to conceive that husband and wife had ever been very fond of each other' (493). Focussing his energies on his collection, Transome withdraws from all meaningful human interaction. Only when he begins to value the company of Esther and his grandson Harry does the purpose and protection offered by collecting become unnecessary: 'he would perhaps have made a holocaust of his flies and beetles if it had been necessary in order to keep this living, lively kindness about him' (492-3).

Eliot's use of 'holocaust' here emphasises the violent disruption which has taken place in Transome's thinking. The 'living, lively kindness' of family is contrasted with the barrenness of his previous collecting. The mark of Transome's reintegration into an emotionally active and potent circle comes when Harry upsets a whole drawer of specimens and the disruption is regarded not as a threat to the seclusion of the collector but simply as another of 'Harry's remarkable feats' (492).

In *Middlemarch* it is the Reverend Farebrother who is the natural history collector, creating a retreat from both the demands of female company - a male space 'with nothing but pickled vermin...with no carpet on the floor' - and from social and professional tensions (160). Although the collection allows him to aspire to 'modern research', in fact it acts instead, especially in the earlier books of the novel, to present him as ineffectual, outdated and trivial. His taste for local gossip is mirrored by his collector's attention to microscopic observations and 'delicate orthoptera' (162). He immerses himself in the accumulation of small parcels of knowledge which might in other contexts be meaningful but are here instead simply expressive of a wider social and scientific world passing him by. Farebrother's preoccupation with ordering his collection, his detailed pedantic care of objects, becomes not an expression of scientific exploration but a refuge from personal and social deficiency. His careful display of specimens in drawers and jars offers explanations for the scientific meanings of his collection, but the extended personal meanings are reduced and neutralised by the petrified relationship suggested by the rule-governed classification of display. So it is fitting that it is in Farebrother's study, surrounded by the display of a life-time's collecting, that Fred Vincy comes to understand that the vicar offers him no threat in his suit to Mary Garth. Busying himself with his specimens,

Farebrother denies his own desire and leaves the young lovers alone for a romantic moment. While the vicar concentrates his energy on a 'stupendous spider', Fred's 'dreadful certainty' that Farebrother may at last offer a successful challenge to him induces in Mary only the 'inclination to laugh' (543). Poor Farebrother's act of heroic kindness thus goes unnoticed by Fred and Mary, and the collection again acts as a convenient retreat for the disappointed lover who subjugates his personal and sexual needs to the demands of his collection.

The apparent bumbling inefficacy of Farebrother the collector is complicated and mitigated as the novel progresses and he becomes a more active force for good in the Middlemarch community. He remains, however, an outsider, ultimately confined, like Dorothea, to making small-scale interventions in the lives of those around him. What also lingers is the frustration of his love for Mary Garth. While Farebrother may offer a more complex characterisation of the collector than Collins's Fairlie, both share a sense of disappointed sexuality. They inhabit a reduced shadow-world - the 'profound exclusion' of Limmeridge - where activity, especially sexual activity, is neutered and consumed by a preoccupation with things.[23]

This sense of the ambivalent sexuality of the collector particularly concerned those collectors who chose the new, manufactured 'things' as the objects of their desire. Those who collected 'serious' objects linked to the philosophical rationale of historical or scientific enquiry were not without the threat of sexual taint, but the

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[23] Collecting has been extensively explored in terms of sexuality, particularly by psychoanalytic theorists. Freud's biological drive model, for example, directly links collecting to sexual drive, while also identifying a resemblance to hunting and the display of trophies from the aggressive drive. More recently, Jean Baudrillard described collecting as 'a powerful mechanism of compensation during critical phases in a person's sexual development'. (Jean Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', in *The Cultures of Collecting* ed. by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion, 1994), 7-24, (p.9).

'lesser arts', lacking the intellectual and social status of fine art, antiquarianism or natural history, allowed the collector to withdraw from scientific or cultural discussion among peers and indulge in something altogether more private, domestic and apparently reductive. China, glass, silverware and textiles were inextricably linked to household affairs and, removed from the marketplace to the private home, were associated with excess, decoration - and femininity. This was not a new view. As Robert Jones explores in his examination of taste in the eighteenth century, the desire 'for fripperies and extravagance' was associated with poor taste and, more significantly, 'could be dismissed as effeminate'.[24] By the middle of the nineteenth century, the choosing and buying of objects was accepted as women's work, but was rarely afforded the elevated status associated with collecting. Most of the manuals aimed at educating public taste and improving the quality of objects on show in the home were aimed specifically at women - Charles Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste* (1878) openly sought to influence 'a lady's opinion' - but were directed towards influencing what was regarded as the dilettante shopping of the female rather than the serious-minded investigation of the male.

In *The Woman in White*, Collins begins fully to explore this ambiguity around the sexuality of the collector. Fairlie becomes subject to a deluge of adjectives which not only suggest emasculation but, I would argue, act more radically to neuter and desexualise him, his enthralment to the collection rendering him impotent: he is 'over refined' and 'frail'; he has 'effeminately small' feet in 'womanish slippers' and 'white delicate hands' (31). Again in *No Name* (1862), Collins repeats the trope,

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[24] Robert W. Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.ix.

using similar terms in his descriptions of Noel Vanstone who jealously guards his 'litter of curiosities' – Vanstone is 'frail, flaxen-haired' with a complexion 'as delicate as a young girl's'. When Magdalen, in disguise, first confronts Vanstone with the loss of the sisters' fortune, Collins takes pains to contrast the 'indomitable earnestness' of his feisty, sexually-desirable heroine with 'the abject mannikin before her, cowering in his chair'.[25] Later, when he is already ensnared in Magdalen's scheme to trap him into marriage, Vanstone's 'undeniably appreciative eye for a handsome woman' becomes simply an extension of his appreciative eye for his collection of curiosities. His physical description immediately denies the existence of any ability to make his glance potent. He is forced to confine himself to 'bowing, simpering and admiring Magdalen through his half-closed eyelids'. The 'appreciative eye' is immediately reduced and confined, unthreatening, 'half-closed' (291).

It is Vanstone's relationship with Lecount, however, which most clearly demonstrates his need to claim vicarious power through his objects. He faces the final social and sexual emasculation of being in thrall to his housekeeper: Magdalen quickly realizes that 'It was Mrs. Lecount's habitual practice to decide everything for her master in the first instance, and then to persuade him that he was not acting under his housekeeper's resolution, but under his own' (285). This can only be resisted by incorporating Lecount into the physicality of his collection. So Vanstone moves easily from the description of a Peruvian candlestick of which 'there are only three of that pattern in the world', and which is 'one of my father's bargains', to the introduction of his housekeeper: 'Mrs Lecount is like the curiosities, Miss Garth –

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[25] Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, ed. by Virginia Blain, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.291. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

she is one of my father's bargains. You are one of my father's bargains, are you not, Lecount?' (281-3). Just as his ownership of valuable 'property' allows Vanstone to assert an imagined and usurped social position which, he claims, rivals 'all the crowned heads in Europe', so the adoption of Lecount into the collection enables him to assert an imagined mastery which he evidently lacks. Vanstone's description of Lecount, moreover, not only neatly encapsulates his craving for social and personal dominance but also, by claiming her as a collected object, personifies and sexualises his relationship to the entire pantheon of objects within his collection.

In contrast to fictional characterisations of collectors as closeted, withdrawn and frustrated, those who, in reality, were successfully pursuing objects in the second half of the nineteenth-century needed to do more than simply retire to their studies to order and label. Collecting was an active passion which relied on a network of social contacts if it were to flourish. A number of regional journals emerged by the 1880s, for example, expressly to allow collectors outside London to keep track of dealings in the capital: *The Collector* was published in Hull, Nottingham and York to raise 'new issues', provide 'answers to correspondents' and, most importantly, to feature 'our London letter'.[26] But the scramble for objects was not confined to national boundaries. As prices rose steadily amongst London dealers, the most committed collectors pursued objects across Europe, from both private and commercial sources. Many conveniently combined collecting with business interests which required extensive travel: Liverpool's George Holt (1825-1896), for example, used both his wealth and opportunities as ship owner and merchant to create a collection of

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[26] *The Collector*, 1 (December 1884), p.1. The journal only published eight monthly editions, closing in August 1885.

paintings, prints and porcelain. By the 1870s, in fact, the enthusiasm of British collectors for scouring the most popular European locations for objects - notably the Italian cities of Venice and Florence, and the French capital - had created a shortage. Writing from Florence in 1891, Thomas Armstrong, Director of Fine Art at the South Kensington Museum, bemoaned:

> The constant and ever-increasing drain on the specimens of decorative art of a moveable kind during the last 20 years...has been so great that it has been long apparent to those occupied in such matters that the supply of genuine works which could be offered for sale must soon be exhausted.[27]

The journal of Lady Charlotte Schreiber gives some idea of the energy required to be part of this circle and the pressure placed by collectors on all objects of 'a moveable kind'. In 1869, for example, a summer visit to the Hague allowed her to buy, in a single day but from a variety of sources, two Chelsea pugs, an enamel nutmeg grater, a transfer-printed box, two snuff boxes, a flacon, a Bow mill-jug and a Dresden tea-pot. Lady Schreiber had no illusions about the quality of the objects – 'none of these things either bargains or very remarkable' she notes – but appeared to consider them worth the trouble of the journey, since they are 'all pretty good'.[28] In March 1870 alone, her collecting took her to 'Avignon, Nimes, Montpellier, Arles, Cette, Narbonne, Perpignan, Gerona, Barcelona, Montserrat, Tarragona, Valencia, Alicante and Madrid' while she scoured twenty two Dutch and German towns during the summer of 1878.[29]

Yet while collectors like Charlotte Schreiber were plotting routes across a continent, the notion of the retiring, secretive collector remained deeply embedded.

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[27] *Thirty-ninth Report of the Department of Science and Art* (London, 1892), p.xxix, Archive of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Bardini Nominal File.
[28] Schreiber, *Journals,* p.35.
[29] ibid., p.94.

For both Fairlie and Farebrother, for example, the desire to display their objects sets up a tension with the instinct to protect or even hide the collection. Fairlie chooses to have his collection photographed and to display the reproductions while keeping the originals safely locked away in his private room. Farebrother engages in the mechanics of display – ordering and labelling – but the exhibition of his things becomes the 'higher price' he asks of Lydgate for a particularly fine specimen which Lydgate wants to take home. The display of things becomes problematic:

> 'Suppose I ask you to look through my drawers and agree with me about all my new species...You must learn to be bored, remember...' Lydgate had after all to give some scrutiny to each drawer, the Vicar laughing at himself, and yet persisting in the exhibition. (163)

Elsewhere, too, the collector was still being portrayed as awkward and retiring. The *Punch Almanack* for 1875 featured several dishevelled and obsessive collectors, including a satire of 'Chronic Chinamania (Incurable)' in which a 'pale enthusiast' is shown exhibiting his collection to visitors:

CHRONIC CHINAMANIA (INCURABLE).

Pale K-thusiast. "THIS IS THE CREAM OF MY COLLECTION, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. IT IS QUITE UNIQUE. IT WAS MADE BY THE FALLOWBROOK POTTERY THAT WAS STARTED IN 1876. IT TOOK THEM THREE YEARS TO PRODUCE THIS PLATE, THEIR ONLY ONE, AND THEN—AND THEN——"
Ruddy Philistine. "AND THEN THEY SHUT UP, I SUPPOSE?" *Pale Esthetica.* "ER—YES!"
Ruddy Philistine. "AND I DON'T WONDER!!"

Fig. 10: 'Chronic Chinamania (Incurable)', *Punch*, 'Almanack' 1875, 68 (17 December 1874), n.p.

The fictional tropes are here repeated: the slight, bent, middle-aged male collector stands just outside a circle largely constructed of young fashionable women. It is not the object, a plate, which is the focus of attention so much as the collector himself. He pleads for validation with his upturned eyes and imploring gesture, a gesture repeated by the woman behind him, perhaps a younger wife (herself presented like some kind of oriental collectable). He offers the prime example of an evidently extensive collection for admiration, a piece which took 'three years to produce', but the visitors are uninterested. The male at the centre of the group – a 'ruddy philistine' – actively mocks the collector, the females look on in uniform boredom, hands in pockets. The collector is again a locus of frustrated desire, tongue-tied in the presence of visitors ('er-yes' he replies in response to the 'ruddy philistine's' direct questioning), and seen only to bore and disappoint more active members of society.[30]

Despite, or perhaps because of, increasingly numerous satires such as this *Punch* cartoon, the collecting of objects was becoming socially legitimated, affording what might otherwise have been regarded as abnormal acquisitiveness a sanction which some commentators have identified as the key to understanding the processes of collecting. Russel Belk, for example, in his essay on 'Collectors and Collecting' suggests:

> The fact that many collectors readily admit to being addicted indicates the power of the attraction or of the social sanction bestowed upon compulsive activity when it is legitimized with the label 'collecting'.[31]

During the mid 1870s and into the 1880s, this sanction blossomed into positive encouragement. A glance at the publication record for the period, for example, shows

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[30] *Punch*, 'Almanack' 1875, 68 (17 December 1874), n.p.
[31] Russel W. Belk, 'Collectors and Collecting', in *Interpreting Objects and Collections* ed. by Susan M. Pearce (London and New York; Routledge, 1994), 317-326 (p.319).

that in the 1860s there was only the *Collector's Circular* which survived just a year, from 1865-6, before folding. Even by the early 1870s only one publication was being published nationally, *The Antiquary*, extravagantly claiming to be 'a fortnightly medium of intercommunication for archaeologists, antiquarians, numismatists, the virtuosi and collectors of articles of virtu and curiosities'. By the late 1880s, however, a number of publications had been launched to tap into the demands of the burgeoning market, including *Coin Collector's News* (1880), *The Collector* (1884), *The Collector and Art Furnisher* (1886), *the Connoisseur* (1895) and *Bric-a-Brac, the Collector's Manual* (1895).[32] Similarly the art press, which had previously largely confined its interest to painting and sculpture, now began to address the needs of the decorative art collector: in 1869 *Art Journal* ran a pair of articles aimed at emerging connoisseurs of English China, describing both the Bow and Chelsea china factories and claiming that the increase in interest in English pottery could 'doubtless' be traced to the 'publication of guides' and increased information aimed at the collector.[33]

Yet despite these developments, there was little change in the public perception of the collector as somehow lacking and possibly malign. Even amongst collectors themselves, there was some ambivalence about the nature of their activity. *The Connoisseur* recognised that 'until recent years' collectors had 'earned...as a class the derision of the ignorant'. It admitted that its readers might well display 'amiable weaknesses' as a result of following 'an unwise, but never despicable

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[32] The titles appearing during the late 1880s and 1890s also reflect the influence of the aesthetic and Arts and Crafts movements, and a change towards the use of things as art furnishing for the lifestyle of the connoisseur, rather than as self-contained collections.

[33] *Art Journal*, 8, (August 1869), p.258.

passion', but concluded, rather defensively, that these were 'hardly sufficient to justify the cheap cynicism of the superior being'.[34] By 1890 *Blackwood's* was emphasising the predatory nature of collectors searching for new objects in a piece entitled 'The Collector on the Prowl'.[35] This darker side to the collecting impulse was beginning to fascinate fiction writers who extended portrayals beyond the man and his things to the ways in which the habit of collecting imposed itself on human relationships. The portrait of the collector was still rooted in an association with detachment, disempowerment and impotence – but the machinations of the collecting habit came to be represented as increasingly sinister, threatening the identity of the collector's social circle and imposing an objectified relationship upon companions and lovers.

In George Meredith's *The Egoist* (1879), Sir Willoughby is a knowledgeable and active collector:

> I profess to be a connoisseur...I am poor in Old Saxony, as you know; I
> can match the country in Sèvres, and my inheritance of China will not
> easily be matched. (442)

He appears to epitomise the ideal of the English gentleman in his country house, his superior taste and lineage visually documented in his collection. In addition to his things, however, he collects people. The relationship of control and power which Noel Vanstone tried to suggest through his claims on the 'bargain' Lecount are now fully explored by Meredith who takes collecting as a starting point for examining the desire to own and control. Clara Middleton, Willoughy's bethrothed, is introduced by Mrs Mountstuart as a 'dainty rogue in porcelain' and it is quickly established that she

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[34] 'To our reader', *The Connoisseur: A Collector's Journal and Monthly Review*, 1:1 (January 1895), pp.5-6.
[35] *Blackwood's Magazine*, 147 (1890), pp.677-687.

is entirely appropriate to be subsumed into Willoughby's collection:

> She was compared to those delicate flowers, the ladies of the Court of China, on rice-paper. A little French dressing would make her at home on the sward...Lady Busshe was reminded of the favourite lineaments of the women of Leonardo, the angels of Luini. Lady Culmer had seen crayon sketches of demoiselles of the French aristocracy resembling her. Some one mentioned an antique statue of a figure breathing into a flute. (75-6)

The metaphor of Clara as china is threaded extensively through the novel. She is 'statue-like' (95), an 'angel in pottery' (150), 'the fragile treasure' (314), 'like a bit of china that wants dusting' (553), and of course she is immediately identified with the china wedding gifts which meet such unlucky fates: Mrs Busshe's table service which sits unregarded in the house and has to be sent back to the shop and, worse still, De Craye's porcelain vase which gets smashed on its way to the marriage houseparty. At the end of the novel Clara's father openly articulates the metaphor - 'but the broken is the broken, sir, whether in porcelain or in human engagements' - and suggests that Clara is removed from Willoughby's collection to an even more secluded and threatening one, 'the enclosure of an appointed asylum', since this is the only way he can see to allow 'the picking up of the fragments' (525). The implication is that Clara, once 'broken', is as worthless as a damaged object to the careful collector.

What differentiates *The Egoist* from earlier portraits of collectors is that the petrifying relationship of the collector to his object of desire is no longer confined to a single relationship, nor is it recognised only by the knowing reader under the author's careful direction. All of Willoughby's relationships are touched by the collector's impulse to order, sanction and control and those characters subject to his impulses are shown to be acutely aware of their position within his collection. At the very beginning of the novel, Clara asks herself and the reader some challenging

questions: 'Why was she not free? By what strange right was it that she was treated as a possession?' (95) and when Willoughby first asks her to don his family's jewels she herself draws on the metaphors of objectification in trying to defend her unwillingness to wear them: 'does one not look like a victim decked for sacrifice?- the garlanded heifer you see on Greek vases, in that array of jewellery?'(139). When Clara attempts to articulate her concerns to Vernon Whitford, she instinctively resists her identification with the inanimate even without offering anything particular in its place. She challenges Whitford: '[I have] a disposition to rebel?':

> 'To challenge authority at least.'
> 'That is a dreadful character.'
> 'At all events it is a character.'
> 'Fit for an Alpine comrade?'
> 'For the best of comrades anywhere.'
> 'It is not a piece of drawing-room sculpture: that is the most one can say for it!' (159)

The use of collecting as an understood metaphor is most clearly elaborated in Willoughby's relationship to Clara, but also runs throughout the rest of the novel. In his impassioned courtship of Laetitia Dale he reiterates an admiration of woman as object which precludes the possibility of change or emotional growth: 'You were a precious cameo...You loved me, you belonged to me, you were mine, my possession, my jewel; I was prouder of your constancy than of anything else that I had on earth' (477). Willoughby desires not only the possessing of Laetitia but also the possession of her 'constancy', a woman without an inner life subject to change, an understood object whose surface is everything. It is an ideal, points out Meredith, a 'common male Egoist ideal', that reduces women to 'a waxwork sex' incapable of making independent decisions, uncomfortable conclusions or 'awful interjections' (195).

The 'common male Egoist ideal' is not confined, however, to male

appropriation of women: 'men' asserts Meredith too, 'are grossly purchasable; good wines have them, good cigars, a goodfellow air' (207). The support of Clara's father, Dr Middleton, is easily gained by the chance to sample Willoughby's comprehensive wine cellar. Nor is it only female characters who are reduced to objects through the use of metaphor – while it is Willoughby and his friends who insist on the china metaphors to confine Clara, it is the author who describes Dr Middleton as 'a fine old picture; a specimen of art' (237). In *The Egoist* Meredith begins to explore the objectification of one human being by another, inspired not simply by sexual desire but by a more insidious and general need for control. The impulses of the collector, 'the egoist', become all-embracing and also dangerous, not simply to those at risk of being collected but to the identity of the collector himself – Willoughby, suggests Meredith, is reduced by his desires, becoming a 'stone man...This petrifaction of egoism' (138).

The formidable, and ultimately disabling, collecting drive in which the characterisation of Willoughby is rooted, is explored yet further in Henry James's early novels which undertake a sophisticated and complex examination of the role of the collector. Moreover collecting is no longer confined to the gentry, but, in a reflection of a shift of social power and changing value systems, is equally significant in the relationships of the mercantile newly-rich, the middle classes and the classless Americans roaming Europe. Developing further the Egoist's all-consuming passion, James presents characters and environments overwhelmed by the collecting and display of things - the discreet, carefully-recorded private collection of Frederick Fairlie has become the conspicuous lifestyle choice of the aesthete, and collecting has become public and commonplace. In *Roderick Hudson* (1875) we are introduced to

Rowland Mallet as a man who 'had the taste of a collector' but, it is implied, his collecting is ad-hoc and unfocussed, his domestic spaces, rather unattractively, 'encumbered with bric-a-brac' and an 'odd jumble' of 'ornaments and curiosities'.[36] In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1882) Ralph Touchett too has a 'considerable collection' of 'bric-a-brac' (162), but unlike Mallet he also has the added refinement of a specific collection rather than simply a jumble of disparate things: it is reported that 'he is very cultivated...he has got a very pretty collection of old snuff-boxes' (218). Gilbert Osmond collects both things – his house 'told of habitation being practised as a fine art' (250) – and, more sinisterly, traditions:

> He had an immense esteem for tradition; he had once told her that the best thing in the world was to have it, but that if one was so unfortunate as not to have it, one must immediately proceed to make it...where he had got his traditions she never learned. He had a very large collection of them, however... (462)

While the conspicuous display in Osmond's home apparently suggests open identification with the cultural refinement and social sophistication of the connoisseur, the heart of his collecting - his 'traditions' - remains compulsive and secretive, his sources unidentified. Subverting the sense of Osmond's home as a polished, liberal environment, it is the raw, obsessive portrait of the collector which James chooses to pursue, Osmond's desperate desire for European 'traditions' locating him as the failed outsider.

The estrangement of James's many collectors from fruitful personal relationships is signalled by the ways in which they disengage their collections of objects from historical and human contexts. Ralph values his things as a distraction, a

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[36] Henry James, *Roderick Hudson*, ed. by Geoffrey Moore (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp.113 and 155. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

genteel pastime; Ormond's 'perfect' rooms are evidence of his preoccupation with domestic design. Neither attempts to make active connections through their things with either the present or the past. Presenting Ned Rosier, perhaps *The Portrait's* most obsessive collector, James suggests that his identity as collector is a shallow-rooted, socially-constructed habit rather than a genuine desire for knowledge, noting ironically that Rosier has *'what are called* cultivated tastes – *an acquaintance* with old china' (236, my italics). Rosier, James suggests, sets up merely an arbitrary, artificial and lifeless relationship to the past through his 'whole museum' of objects (392).[37] Withdrawing objects into their own private environments, James's collectors replace their history with classification, with new personal contexts which create a falsely hermetic world detached from the moral guidelines of the past. Their collections appear simply to reinforce the sense of distance between the old European world and the representatives of a new world who desire, but ultimately fail, to understand the past through its objects.

Like Meredith's Willoughby, however, James's collectors are not simply collectors of things. As William Gass points out in his evaluation of *The Portrait of a Lady*, James begins fully to expose 'human manipulation...what it means to be a consumer of persons, and what it means to be a person consumed'.[38] The processes of collecting and consumption extend beyond the material to influence all interactions within the novels: James's collectors acquire people as readily as things. So although objects are rarely the focus of James's attention - there are few

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[37] James was inherently suspicious of museums and critical of what he considered the disengagement of objects from their historical contexts which took place within museum collections and displays. For a longer discussion of James's views on museums see Violet Hopkins Winner, *Henry James and the Visual Arts* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 1970.

[38] William Gass, 'The High Brutality of Good Intentions', in *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. by Robert D.Bamburg, (New York: Norton, 1975), 704-713 (p.707).

descriptions of actual things and, until later works such as *The Spoils of Poynton*, they take an apparently small role in the development of plot - the processes and machinations associated with objects (the buying, consuming and speculating) are omnipresent in these early novels. The equation of the human with the object, and the resulting objectification of people and relationships, which Meredith proposes throughout *The Egoist*, is James's key thread too in these narratives of the enclosed, self-reflexive world of the European travellers' circuit.

Central relationships in both *Roderick Hudson* and *The Portrait of a Lady* are defined by the appropriation of one human being by another. Roderick Hudson is picked up in America by Rowland Mallet much as he might acquire any other curiosity for his 'odd jumble' of a collection. Acquiring one of Hudson's statues, Mallet also assumes he acquires a recognised interest in Hudson himself and the boundaries between sculptor and sculpture become quickly blurred as Mallet considers the potentially accumulating value of his new possession: 'I am simply very shrewd,' he admits to Mary Garland, 'Roderick will repay me. It's a speculation' (98). The suspicious reaction of Hudson's family to Mallet's proposal to take Roderick to Europe suggests that they instinctively recognise Mallet's proprietorial interest not only in his protégé's work, but also in his person. Mr Striker, speaking on behalf of Roderick's mother, demands to know: 'Would you kindly inform her as exactly as possible just what you propose to do with her son?' (86). The assumption that Rowland has already adopted a position which allows him to 'do with' Roderick as he wishes, to use, protect, dispose of him as he would any other object in his collection, is, of course, implicit here – Rowland's money has bought Roderick's passage to Europe and, in effect, has also acquired the rights to

him as an artist and person. Rowland, confident that he is acting for Roderick's best interest, is able to reply lightheartedly: 'Do, my dear madam...I don't propose to do anything' (86). The apparent reassurance he offers Mrs Hudson is double-edged, however. In one sense he proposes a freedom for Roderick to act as he likes – 'He must do for himself' – but he also reinforces his identity as owner and collector. His object might passively accumulate in value or might reflect well on him as collector, but it does not act. Its identity rests with being part of the collection; it acquires meaning simply by being owned.

It is Mary Garland who shows the clearest recognition of the dangers to Roderick inherent in the proprietorial relationship Rowland constructs. While she agrees that Rowland's arrival 'all unknown, so rich and so polite, and carrying off my cousin in a golden cloud is like something in a fairytale', she instinctively recognises Roderick's passivity in the relationship - he is simply 'carried off' - and his status as object which this implies. Her long-established loyalty to Hudson is contrasted with the collector's potential whimsicality: 'If you should ever grow tired of him – if you should lose your interest in him...remember that he is all I have – that he is everything – and that it would be very terrible' (91). Hudson is, Mary recognises, an object of amusement for Mallet who has 'no duties, no profession, no home. You live for your pleasure' (99) and it is Mary, whose relationship with Hudson is subject to the exchange of more complex and problematic commitments and, ultimately, vows of love and loyalty, who is forced to make the 'dreadful resignation' to please the tastes of her aesthete visitor (100).

As Hudson discovers both professional success and personal discontent in the course of the novel, Rowland's unwillingness to leave him, even for a few days,

implies the same ambiguities which characterise their relationship from the outset. Mallet is both the caring friend and mentor, and the owner protecting his interests and investments. So he can assure himself that 'if Roderick chose to follow a crooked path, it was no fault of his; he had given him, he would continue to give him, all that he had offered him – friendship, sympathy advice', yet on Hudson's death, Mallet's thoughts are not with the sculptor but with himself (160). Deprived now of an object of interest, Mallet expresses his sorrow at the end of a professional fascination rather than a personal relationship: 'Now that all was over Rowland understood how exclusively, for two years, Roderick had filled his life. His occupation was gone' (387).

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Ralph Touchett's complex and ambiguous relationship to Isabel recalls the Hudson-Mallet dynamic. Ralph acts as Isabel's benefactor, unrequited lover, guide and mentor – but also as owner and collector. In an echo of Mallet's reassurances to Hudson's family, Ralph, who buys an 'interest' in Isabel in much the same way as Mallet acquires rights to Roderick, suggests to his father that the money will allow Isabel to do 'absolutely what she likes...She wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free' (205). He recognises too, however, that the gift also provides him with a speculation for the future:

> 'You speak as if it were for your mere amusement.'
> 'So it is, a good deal.'
> 'Well, I don't think I understand,' said Mr Touchett with a sigh...'When I cared for a girl – when I was young – I wanted to do more than look at her...Doesn't it occur to you that a young lady with sixty thousand pounds may fall a victim to the fortune-hunters?'...
> 'That's a risk and it has entered into my calculation. I think it's appreciable, but I think it's small, and I am prepared to take it.' (205-7)

Acting under many of the same impulses as his rival, it is Ralph who recognises Osmond's motives as a collector and who appreciates most distinctly the

objectification of Isabel which takes place in her marriage. Isabel, he sees,

> represented Gilbert Osmond...He recognised Osmond, as I say; he recognised him at every turn. He saw how he kept all things within limits; how he adjusted, regulated, animated their manner of life. Osmond was in his element; at last he had material to work with. (423)

Gilbert Osmond's collecting instincts are more extensive and refined, however, than Ralph's experimental speculation. Having tried to create the perfect object from the material Isabel provides, Osmond encourages Lord Warburton's suit for Pansy in order to extend and complete his collection. As for any devout collector, the relationship between objects within the collection is significant in assigning them value, and Osmond's relationships are described in distinctly acquisitive terms:

> We knew that he was fond of originals, of rarities, of the superior, the exquisite; and now that he had seen Lord Warburton, whom he thought a very fine example of his race and order, he perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand. (328)

When Osmond's personal relationships disintegrate, it is as a collector that he responds. Discussing the destruction of his marriage towards the close of the novel, he is incapable of matching Madame Merle's uncharacteristic 'sudden outbreak of passion', turning instead to refuge in his things:

> He got up as he spoke, and walked to the chimney, where he stood a moment bending his eye, as if he had seen them for the first time, on the delicate specimens of rare porcelain with which it was covered. He took up a small cup and held it in his hand...(558)

Recalling the metaphors used to define Clara in *The Egoist*, Serena Merle attempts to draw a comparison between the 'rare porcelain' and Isabel - 'Please be very careful of that precious object' – and Osmond responds by expressing his disappointment in Isabel as a wife in the terms of a collector surveying a damaged piece: '"It already has a wee bit of a tiny crack," said Osmond dryly, as he put it down' (558). Assessing

all his relationships with the cold eye of the connoisseur, Osmond even dismisses his daughter when she fails to be the obedient object he intended. Educated to reflect well on her father's taste, Pansy's transformation into an extension of Osmond's collection is complete when she is sent to a convent after her apparent rebellion in falling in love with Ned Rosier:

> To mark the difference between his sympathies and her own, and to show that if he regarded his daughter as a precious work of art it was natural he should be more and more careful about the finishing touches. (567)

Although, as the fates of Roderick Hudson and Lord Warburton demonstrate, becoming subsumed into a collection of human curiosities is not exclusively a female fate, it is women who are most often, and most destructively, subject to the collectors' machinations. The frustrated and unsuccessful sexuality of the fictional collectors of the 1860s has become now a more complex portrait, but it retains at its core the sense of sexuality denied, disabled and perverted by an obsessive desire to collect and own. In *Roderick Hudson*, for example, Mrs Light instinctively recognises that Rowland's cluttered apartment somehow effeminises him: 'If one of us poor women had half as many knick-knacks we should be famously abused' she notes (155). In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Osmond and Touchett squabble over Isabel not like a pair of rival lovers but like a pair of auction-room competitors. Touchett, effectively stripped of sexual or romantic aspirations because of his consumptive illness, lavishes attention on his collection of snuff-boxes. For Madame Merle, entwined with the sexual politics of more active and predatory members of society, the connection between enforced sexual disengagement and collecting is clear: 'The collection,' she suggests pointedly of Ralph's enforced seclusion 'is all that is wanted to make it pitiful' (218). Osmond uses his collection to attempt to identify with the

sophisticated aesthete and so to lure a glittering social circle. When this attempt fails, it acts instead as a substitute for social success and a site for displaced desire. Heading a dysfunctional family, without friends or profession, Osmond is given meaning only through his possessions, his social failure petrified in his cluster of beautiful things. The collection which he intended to act as both the foundation for, and the demonstration of, his ability to create 'something sacred and precious – the observance of a magnificent form' becomes instead an indicator of impotence and failure (571-2).

As in the 1860s, collecting is associated with disengagement and retirement. Instinctively Isabel notes that Ralph and Osmond share 'something of the same quality, this appearance of thinking life was a matter of connoisseurship' (286). While in Ralph's case, the habit is mitigated by a certain amount of self-knowledge and humour, his connoisseurship sitting as 'an anomaly, a kind of humorous excrescence', for Ormond 'it was the keynote and everything was in harmony with it' (286). Ironically, Isabel herself uses collecting terms at the moment in which she comes to recognise and understand the collecting impulse in those closest to her – Osmond, she notes, is 'a specimen apart' (285). Perhaps more significantly still, however, is James's following comment: 'Isabel did not say all these things to herself at the time; but she felt them and afterwards they became distinct' (286). Only when she has experienced Osmond's habit of connoisseurship in the petrification of all his relationships, do Isabel's initial impressions take on a distinctness which requires metaphors of collecting to give them expression.

The impotence of the collector is so firmly rooted in the novel that Rosier, too, is inevitably subject to the collector's ultimate fate of loneliness. An obsessive

collector of things, Rosier finds the catalyst for his relationship with Pansy Osmond quite clearly in the habitual desire for fine specimens:

> She was admirably finished; she had had the last touch; she was really a consummate piece. He thought of her in amorous meditation a good deal as he might have thought of a Dresden-china shepherdess. (386)

Although it appears as though the apparent coldness of his initial connoisseur's calculation is overtaken by a genuine craving to marry Pansy, so much so that he is prepared to sell almost his entire collection – 'all my bibelots' – at auction in order to raise enough capital to make him an acceptable suitor, it is in fact his dispossession which Rosier feels most deeply. The vulnerability and loss of identity he experiences having been stripped of his collection battle momentarily with his sexual desire for Pansy:

> 'Do you mean that without my *bibelots* I am nothing? Do you mean that they were the best thing about me? That's what they told me in Paris; oh, they were very frank about it. But they hadn't seen *her*!' (562)

Inevitably his romantic passion is, however, ultimately too weak to withstand the more potent draw of the collection. Having sold his smaller, cheaper objects to raise capital for the larger, more desirable one Pansy represents, Rosier is able to console himself for the failure of the speculation by immersing himself in his remaining treasures. His sexual appetite submits to his larger appetite for his things: when it becomes clear that his relationship with Pansy is doomed, Isabel remarks that 'it was well that Mr Edward Rosier had kept his enamels!' (591). James's suggestion – with its expressive exclamation mark – is that the enamels will provide sufficient consolation. Not only can the irritation and disappointment of being robbed of his ultimate object be eased by re-engaging with the collection but further, the re-engagement will allow Rosier to reclaim an identity which was threatened during the

collection's temporary displacement by his romantic and sexual desire. 'Nothing without his *bibelots*', he can only become something again by concentrating on his depleted collection.

Obsessed by the hermetic world of his own collection, Rosier is ironically unaware that he has himself become subject to wider processes of collecting, objectified as 'an ornament of the American circle in Paris' (330). He remains blind to his status as decoration and it is precisely because he believes himself to be a significant and active member of society, rather than an 'ornament', that he is astounded by Osmond's objection to his suit. By contrast, the women in James's early novels are all too clearly aware of their predicament as ornament. In *Roderick Hudson*, Madame Grandoni tells how 'Mr Leavenworth, who seems to be going about Europe with the sole view of picking up furniture for his "home", as he calls it, should think Miss Blanchard a very handsome *morceau*'. Moreover, Miss Blanchard herself is not blind to the processes at work, and is apparently 'willing to become a sort of superior table ornament' (385).

While the Jamesian women largely accept objectification as inevitable, they are imaginative and determined in their construction of strategies to subvert it. In *Roderick Hudson,* Christina Light demonstrates an understanding of the nuances of social display which creates for each human object an appropriate setting. Arriving unannounced at an intimate evening party given by Madame Grandoni, Christina discovers for the first time that such low-key occasions exist. She immediately feels out of place, aligning herself with the showy objects required for a different kind of gathering:

> 'I see,' she went on, 'I do very well for balls and great banquets, but when people wish to have a cosy, friendly, comfortable evening, they leave me

outside with the big flower-pots and the gilt candlesticks.' (289)

Madame Grandoni, of course, invites her to stay but not without an awareness that

the temporary collection of people she has accumulated will become more brilliant

by the addition of the fashionable young Christina:

> 'I am sure you are welcome to stay, my dear,' said Madame
> Grandoni...'Your dress will do very well with its fifty flounces, and there is
> no need of your going into a corner. Indeed, since you are here, I propose to
> have the glory of it. You must remain where my people can see you.' (289)

Christina is finally displayed to the best advantage 'standing in the little circle of

lamplight...a sort of extemporised *tableau vivant*' (289). Instead of accepting her role,

however, she takes direct action to subvert it: breaking up the tableau, she 'flung off

her burnous, crumpled it together...tossing it in a corner', rejecting her inanimate

status for the opportunity to create an acquaintance with Mary Garland which will

have repercussions for all the relationships in the novel.

This female awareness of objectification is not wholly new to the 1870s and

1880s. In 1866 in *Felix Holt*, Eliot expresses Mrs Transome's predicament of being

displaced by her son, bullied by Jermyn and ignored by her husband, as a forlorn

reduction which aligns her with 'old-fashioned stucco ornaments':

> what she had once regarded as her knowledge and accomplishments had
> become as valueless as old-fashioned stucco ornaments, of which the
> substance was never worth anything, while the form is no longer to the
> taste of any living mortal. (106)

The ultimate object, reliant on a 'form' now destroyed by age and with an inner life

'never worth anything', Mrs Transome has no way of creating a new purpose or

identity. She has simply gone out of fashion, aligned to a 'taste' which situates her in

the past, outside the active concerns of 'living mortals'. Mrs Transome accepts the

inevitable, and later says sadly to Jermyn 'I am as unnecessary as a chimney

ornament' (204).

While James's representation of woman as object is not new, however, their reactions to the role and their subversion of it is. Mark Seltzer claims that while James ostensibly disavows the common representations of power – political influence, for example – it is in his construction of networks of social control that he becomes 'radically entangled with the technologies of power'.[39] In Mrs Transome's reduction to object, Eliot both expresses and creates powerlessness. James's women, in contrast, move on from a recognition of the impulses of society to objectify them to a sophisticated understanding of the 'technologies of power' inherent in their social circle enabling them, ultimately, to become formidable instruments of that power and so subvert their position as object. Mrs Transome may demonstrate as quick an awareness of her predicament as Christina Light, but it is the later heroine who challenges objectification through what Rowland Mallett recognises as a 'metamorphosis' (291). Unlike Mrs Transome, the Jamesian women attempt to negotiate their own mode of display and hence their value as ornament in the marketplace. Christina Light is just a novice, and her predicament still disturbs her – her 'usual low, cool, penetrating voice' is marked by 'a certain tremor of feeling' (289). Experienced, successful matriarchs like Madame Grandoni or Madame Merle, however, are better able to barter confidently with people and relationships in order to make themselves indispensable to the social organism. Whereas Mrs Transome's age is presented as a contributing factor in her decline, it is the experience of James's worldly older women which enables them to overturn the pressures which threaten to

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[39] Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.146.

reduce and objectify them and instead to create some complex social collections of their own. James's matriarchs make possible the marriages which end in objectification; they act as brokers to human relationships in return for an increased collection of social dependents. So ultimately when this control breaks down, there can remain no place for them in their familiar web. The magnitude of Serena's failure at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady* is marked by her expulsion from the society she has taken years to cultivate. 'I shall go to America' she announces at the conclusion of her conversation with Isabel (594).

This complex role of the matriarch as dealer is made possible only by an acute and professional understanding of the inter-relationships between people and things, between people as things, and between the professional collector and the objects of her attention. It is an understanding which allows Serena Merle to recognise and admire in others similar machinations to her own. It is she, for example, who identifies in Ralph Touchett's generosity the desire to speculate on Isabel and who recognises that the 'extra lustre' of the inheritance inevitably attracts other collectors like Osmond: 'He made you a rich woman...He imparted that extra lustre which was required to make you a brilliant match' (594). Similarly her admiration for Osmond is partly founded on an appreciation of the way he displays his things:

> She looked about the room – at the old cabinets, pictures, tapestries, surfaces of faded silk. 'Your rooms at least are perfect. I'm struck with that afresh, whenever I come back; I know none better anywhere. You understand this sort of thing as nobody anywhere does.' (265)

Her respect for Osmond's understanding of 'this sort of thing' eloquently expresses both her own appreciation of the importance of appearances created by objects and his reduction to a man obsessed by creating the perfect connoisseur's environment.

By the time Henry James introduces Serena Merle to his readers in 1882, with her refined and dangerous habit of regarding people as objects, the general public perception of things was also demonstrating a sophistication which was only nascent at the time of the Great Exhibition. While an economic downturn was beginning to identify collecting as a sensible means for ensuring financial security, the growing numbers of people aspiring to, or attempting to consolidate, middle-class status simultaneously ensured a lively interest in collecting (and the display of the collection) as a means of making visible the actual or projected self. Although this was a movement which had been gathering pace throughout the century, there is a feeling that Serena Merle's extraordinarily perceptive estimation of the social and personal fabric, the 'cluster of appurtenances' which goes to make up an individual's collection, simply would not have been understandable thirty years earlier:

> There is no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our "self"? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know that a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things*! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive. (223)

Serena's personal identity, 'a large part of myself', as well as her public one, 'one's self for other people', is located not in her past, which is hazy, nor in a home or family (she moves from visit to visit and is unknown to her only daughter) but in her 'cluster of appurtenances'. It is fluid, it 'overflows...and then flows back again', as the things she owns, wears and displays change. She has no single, fundamental core to identify as self, only the tidal changes dictated by fashion. The obsession with the object, to the exclusion of fruitful personal relationships, which was evident in earlier collectors is here taken to its logical conclusion. Serena Merle is nothing more than

the sum of her things. It is these things which have to be 'all expressive', which have to act as witnesses to, and interpreters of, her identity.

By 1880, under the energetic encouragement of the government and individuals such as Henry Cole, objects were inhabiting an increasingly visible place in the social structure. Juxtaposing desirable things, eliminating their old contexts and creating for them new meanings, the dazzling International Exhibitions, along with the booming stores, offered for sale a constructed reality in which, as Serena Merle suggests, identity came to be lodged in an individual's collection of things. Recognising an increasing elision between the personal and the material, a use of objects to both create and challenge identity, this increasingly sophisticated understanding accompanied a substantial growth in the number of collectors, in the material collected and in popular interest in the collector. Serena Merle poses difficult questions of selfhood - 'What do you call one's self? Where does it begin? Where does it end?' Her interrogation of identity finds a solution not in moral absolutes or class values but in 'the great respect for things' which drives the collector, in the tangible object, in 'everything that belongs to us'.

EPILOGUE

'Things' were of course the sum of the world. [1]

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, many of the developments I have been exploring in regional museums gathered pace. Collections, and the buildings which housed them, were enlarged at an impressive rate as more public money was increasingly used to augment the range and quality of objects on display. Perhaps more significantly, the growth of museum visiting and the public prestige associated with offering substantial personal collections for posterity, convinced many private collectors to develop an intense, long-term relationship with their local museum. The experience of Nottingham Museum throughout the 1880s, for example, is similar to that of many regional museums: the familiar tone and sense of shared enthusiasm evident in the lengthy correspondence between wealthy private collector Felix Joseph and the museum demonstrates the intimacy between the individual and his institution. In January 1885, Joseph promises 'I am going to send you in a day or two six very prettily chased old English Silver spoons'; almost a year later he is still holding out the lure of objects for display: 'I have bought lately a wonderful Vase and Pedestal. Wedgwood, almost handsomer than any in my collection: daresay it will before long join Company with the rest of my odds and ends!'[2]

In addition, increasingly professional research, cataloguing and exhibition

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[1] Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, ed. by Bernard Richards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.16. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.
[2] Felix Joseph, Letters to George Wallis (January 27 1885 and November 13 1885). The Felix Joseph Archive, Nottingham Castle Museums and Art Gallery.

ensured that more was known about the objects than ever before. The post of curator, which, in the early years of many smaller museums, was frequently run on an ad hoc basis through a series of gentleman's agreements and with little payment, was now more formally recognised and rewarded. Sunderland Museum, for example, had had a curator, James W. Kirkby since 1865, but he had worked for only 48 days a year at a salary of £25. By the end of the century, however, Mr Kirkby had been replaced by a full-time curator and by 1905 a more senior post of Director had been introduced, with responsibility for both the museum and the local library. This growing professionalism was afforded national status in 1889 with the foundation of the Museums Association, the first organisation to represent the interests of a range of museums and their staff nationwide.

The 1880s and 1890s was a period frequently obsessed with the ownership and display of objects. As Rachel Bowlby and others have discussed, there was a continued and rapid growth in consumer culture, and the consequent development of advertising, department stores and shopping as a leisure activity. Desirable imported goods became increasingly accessible and affordable: French ceramics, glass and furniture by Lalique or Galle and American glass from Tiffany & Co, for example, were easily available. In addition, the growing refinement of industrial mass-production techniques allowed designers like Christopher Dresser to work with large-scale manufacturers to create affordable products with the status of one-off objects, and, with a contrasting emphasis on hand-production methods, the Arts and Crafts group also flourished and expanded. Its network of companies, like the Century Guild established in 1882 and the Art Workers Guild of 1884, continued to raise the profile of objects in the home by designing, manufacturing and astutely marketing

everything from furniture to wallpaper and textiles. The moral seriousness of Arts

and Crafts organisations emphasised the social meanings which could be gleaned

from the manufacture and display of objects, and the launch of William Morris's

Kelmscott Press in 1890, although focussed on the production of books, further

sanctioned the principle of making good design desirable and visible in all aspects of

living. As the century drew to a close, the range of objects available to the middle

classes was more diverse than it had ever been, while the increasingly determined

targeting of women as customers further consolidated the home as a locus of display.

It is tempting to see Mrs Gereth, in Henry James's topical novel *The Spoils of*

Poynton (1897), as representative of a generation attracted to the glittering array of

things above all else. Mrs Gereth exhibited, suggested James,

> [a] strange, almost maniacal disposition to thrust in everywhere the
> question of 'things', to read all behaviour in the light of some fancied
> relation to them. Things were of course the sum of the world; only, for
> Mrs Gereth the sum of the world was rare French furniture and oriental
> china. She could at a stretch imagine people's not 'having', but she
> couldn't imagine their nor wanting and 'not missing'. (16)

With *The Spoils of Poynton* James revisited many of the relationships

between people and objects which he had examined in earlier novels, stating in

stronger terms the passion for objects and for the objectification of people which had

threaded its way through works like *Roderick Hudson* and *The Portrait of A Lady.*

The sense of identity being completely and inextricably entangled with the objects

one owns and displays reaches its culmination in Mrs Gereth. 'The mind's eye', notes

James 'could indeed see Mrs Gereth only in her thick, coloured air; it took all the

light of her treasures to make her concrete and distinct' (100). It was not only James,

however, who found the motif worth attention. Perhaps the most striking

examination of a similar idea is in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

which, playing with ideas of art mirroring life, is predicated on the notion that a human and a work of art could become interchangeable. Gray is, in essence, 'no more...than your green bronze figure...than your ivory Hermes or your silver Faun'.[3] His inner self becomes, figuratively and actually, consumed by his obsession with appearance and display. He becomes entirely objectified so that, at the conclusion of the novel, the destruction of Dorian's portrait inevitably means the destruction of Dorian himself. The obsession with a lifestyle crammed with, and represented by, things is shown to be at best precariously shallow and at worst ruinously treacherous.

The fascination with the ubiquitous and all-consuming desire for things which writers like James and Wilde explored with Mrs Gereth and Dorian Gray, respectively, persisted into the dawning twentieth century. While many of the nineteenth-century habits and structures which had been sustained and reinforced by Victorian objects, were subject to challenge and re-evaluation, interest in the object itself remained. The scope of this thesis cannot possibly include any detailed examination of this evolution but what I hope to do in this brief epilogue is to suggest a few of the ways in which the lingering Victorian attitudes of the 1860s and 1870s were to reappear and be reworked during the decades to follow.

By the early 1900s the fictional relationship between people and their objects had already begun to shift as the nineteenth-century social hierarchy, which had more easily facilitated the ownership of one person by another, also began to reshape. In *The Spoils of Poynton* Mrs Gereth's adoption of the penniless, placeless Fleda Vetch

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[3] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.57.

allows her to make easy comparisons between her companion and the furniture. The girl, it seems, will go some way to filling the void left by the loss of Mrs Gereth's objects at the end of the novel:

> 'Moreover, with nothing else but my four walls, you'll at any rate be a bit of furniture, for that, a little, you know, I've always taken you - quite one of my best finds...'
> The position of a scrap of furniture was one that Fleda could conscientiously accept. (169)

By the time of Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908), however, the inert fate shared by heroines like Isobel Archer and Fleda Vetch is, while still a threat, thrown over by the novel's central female protagonist. Lucy Honeychurch, notes Forster, signally 'failed to be Leonardesque'.[4] The increasing independence and variety of choice, albeit restricted, available to women is reflected in the novel as Lucy breaks off her engagement to Cecil and knowingly rejects her status as object:

> You wrap yourself up in art and books and music, and would try to wrap up me. I won't be stifled, not by the most glorious music, for people are more glorious, and you hide them from me. (192)

The thorny notion of taste is also part of the reordering of social structures which Forster's novel proposes. Whereas for earlier writers like Elizabeth Gaskell the exercise of refined taste was associated with the exercise of other moral and social refinements, by the beginning of the twentieth century we can see a more equivocal authorial attitude to taste. The Emersons, for example, tend to be presented sympathetically by the author even though, at times, they are shown as failing in their appreciation of the finer points of etiquette and are regarded by other, more sober, characters within the novel as possessing dubious taste. Moreover, refined taste, as

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[4] E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View* ed. by Oliver Stallybrass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p.136. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

represented by Cecil, is no longer something to be unequivocally desired. It becomes instead a part of Cecil's coldness and an indicator of his emotional inadequacy. It is associated with restraint and restriction, even with bad manners: "'Since Cecil came back from London,' complains Mrs Honeychurch, 'nothing appears to please him. When I speak he winces - I see him.'" (155). Cecil's embarrassment at the occasional failure of speech, manner or dress by members of the Honeychurch family, rather than highlight his superior taste, renders him instead disagreeable and absurd.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the upheaval in social order which is suggested in *A Room with a View* was becoming more evident in works by writers such as Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh. In *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Waugh examines relationships which depend on ownership and manipulation in much the same way as in Meredith's *The Egoist,* but the structures of hierarchy and nobility which had sustained Willoughby are confused and dysfunctional at Brideshead. Similarly, in *Vile Bodies* (1930), Waugh's earlier portrait of the fashionable lifestyle of the young and wealthy, traditional codes entwined with, and making use of, objects are portrayed as outdated and irrelevant. While issues of display and identity are very much in evidence, they are focussed almost entirely on the body - on dress, behaviour and expression - rather than on external objects. The display of 'things' becomes associated with eccentricity and redundancy, rather than personal and social success, and it is the mad Colonel Blount whose house is most obviously cluttered with objects. On first meeting him, Adam Synes is led,

> down a long corridor, lined with marble busts on yellow marble pedestals, to a large room full of furniture, with a fire burning in a fine rococo fireplace. There was a large leather-topped walnut writing-table under a window

opening on to a terrace.[5]

Later, left alone in the Colonel's study, Adam finds himself in a cluttered personal

museum, a distinctly Victorian environment:

> There was a stuffed owl and a case of early British remains, bone pins and
> bits of pottery and a skull, which had been dug up in the park many years ago
> and catalogued by Nina's governess. There was a cabinet collecting the relics
> of Nina's various collecting fevers - some butterflies and a beetle or two,
> some fossils and some birds' eggs and a few postage stamps. There were
> some bookcases of superbly unreadable books, a gun, a butterfly net, an
> alpenstock in the corner. There were catalogues of agricultural machines and
> acetylene plants, lawn mowers, 'sports requisites'. There was a fire screen
> worked with a coat of arms. The chimney-piece was hung with the
> embroidered saddle-cloths of Colonel Blount's regiment of Lancers. There
> was an engraving of all the members of the Royal Yacht Squadron, with a
> little plan in the corner, marked to show who was who. There were many
> other things of equal interest besides, but before Adam had noticed any more
> he was fast asleep. (72)

The things, though visibly much in evidence, are without current meaning. They

present the leftovers of Nina's and the Colonel's lives and make so little impact that

they fail to keep Adam awake. They act to fortify the reader's impression of the

Colonel as crazy and irrelevant, rather than to bolster either his social or intellectual

status.

This motif, which presents objects as trivial reminders of an inconsequential

past, is repeated throughout *Vile Bodies*. Lottie Crump, one of 'the splendours of the

Edwardian era...oblivious of those changes in the social order which agitate the more

observant *grandes dames*' demonstrates her detachedness from modern life and its

'changes in the social order' through both the actual objects in her home, and the

ones visitors imagine there. Shepheard's Hotel, has 'a good too much

furniture...some of it rare, some of it hideous beyond description':

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[5] Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p.69. Further references to this work
are given in the body of the text.

> There is plenty of red plush and red morocco and innumerable wedding presents of the 'eighties'; in particular many of those massive, mechanical devices covered with crests and monograms, and associated in some way with cigars. It is the sort of house in which one expects to find croquet mallets and polo sticks in the bathroom, and children's toys at the bottom of one's chest of drawers, and an estate map and an archery target - exuding straw - and a bicycle and one of those walking sticks which turn into saws, somewhere in passages, between baize doors, smelling of damp. (37)

Waugh offers an ironic portrait of the hotel owner as faded gentry, surrounded by a clutter of meaningless things, in many cases Victorian things of the 1880s. There is a vagueness about the objects which reflects their lack of consequence; a dismissive listing of 'massive mechanical devices....associated in some way with cigars'. The rootlessness of the young which the novel explores is not compared to an older generation rooted in a past made evident through its objects, but is rather presented as an alternative to a history equally as meaningless as the present and known only in an inventory of irrelevant bits and pieces. In the case of Lottie Crump's hotel the presentation of objects suggesting the faded splendours of the past is doubly ironic since they do not even exist: it is simply 'the sort of house in which one *expects*' these things to exist (my italics).

In many ways, these works of the early twentieth century marked a re-evaluation of Victorian values and structures, rather than disillusion with objects and their meanings. Consumers continued to shop, and a succession of fashionable movements, from Art Nouveau to Modernism, continued to offer the public desirable and beautiful things. The status and profile of the decorative arts gradually rose, partly as a result of the ingrained buying habits of the ever-expanding middle classes, and partly as a consequence of the visibility of a variety of makers and producers, from British studio potter Bernard Leach, who adopted ancient traditions and processes, to American furniture designer Charles Eames, who explored the potential

of new materials like plastics. Similarly, the decorative arts developed as a discipline
as increasing numbers of regional museums created and defined specific decorative
art collections, and appointed specialist staff. And while at national level, the
Victoria and Albert Museum was largely unwilling to collect contemporary pieces
until towards the end of the twentieth century, it did organise a series of exhibitions
of contemporary pieces, first through the associated British Institute of Industrial Art
(BIIA), which closed in 1934, and subsequently through the Circulations Department,
responsible for travelling exhibitions.

In fiction, too, while Victorian forms were rejected by some novelists like
Virginia Wolfe and James Joyce in favour of writing which relied less heavily on the
material environments suggested by things, characters were still often framed by their
homes and the objects within them. There remained a fascination with the things one
chose to represent the self, and the collector, in particular, remained a subject for
fictional curiosity. James's portraits of the isolated, inadequate collector, like Rosier,
are powerful ones, and perceptions in the twentieth century continued to be
influenced by such fictional encounters. Discussing the role of collecting 'in our own
era of faltering religious and ideological authorities', for example, Jean Baudrillard
draws on similar language to describe the collector:

> It is because he feels himself alienated and lost within a social discourse
> whose rules he cannot fathom that the collector is driven to construct an
> alternative discourse...Yet in this endeavour he is condemned to failure: in
> imagining he can do without the social discourse, he fails to appreciate the
> simple fact that he is transposing its open, objective discontinuity into a
> closed, subjective discontinuity, such that the idiom he invents forfeits all
> value for others. This is why withdrawal into an all-encompassing object
> system is synonymous with loneliness...He who does collect can never
> entirely shake off an air of impoverishment and depleted humanity.[6]

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[6] Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting', p.24.

The mid-Victorian presentation of the collector as socially inept, and even threatening, continues to appear in novels of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Frederick, the eponymous collector in John Fowles' novel (1963) of corrupted desire, is equally as reclusive and misanthropic as the earlier Frederick Fairlie, in Collins's *The Woman in White*. At the beginning of the novel, he complains 'I wasn't left alone as much as I expected' and so he takes action to ensure his isolation from any ordinary everyday social intercourse:

> A man came and wanted to do the garden, he'd always done it, and he got very nasty when I sent him away. Then the vicar from the village came and I had to be rude with him. I said I wanted to be left alone, I was Nonconformist, I wanted nothing to do with the village, and he went off la-di-da in a huff. Then there were several people with van-shops and I had to put them off...I had the telephone disconnected too. I soon got in the habit of locking the front gate...Once or twice I saw tradesmen looking through, but people soon seemed to get the point. I was left alone, and could get on with my work.[7]

Frederick's 'work' is to prepare for the abduction and ultimate destruction of art student Miranda, with whom he is obsessed. She is the prize specimen in Frederick's collection just as Clara was Willoughby's prize specimen in *The Egoist*. Many of Meredith's motifs are echoed by Fowles: Fowles's collector, like Willoughby, sees no difference between his observation and manipulation of Miranda and of the butterflies which he more commonly collects. When this particular experiment goes wrong he slips easily into an apparently objective, scientific relationship to another young girl who represents simply an extension of the collection: 'This time it won't be love, it would just be for the interest of the thing and to compare them' (283).

A similar sense of the collector as singular and withdrawn appears again

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[7] John Fowles, *The Collector* (London: Vintage, 1998), p.23. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

almost half a century later in Zadie Smith's novel *The Autograph Man* (2002). The central protagonist, Alex-Li Tandem, is early on presented to readers as being sexually unsuccessful and socially 'humiliated':

> He had been humiliated many times by that ubiquitous good-looking girl who rests against the refrigerator and coolly assesses the validity of your life...try convincing her that you, Alex-Li Tandem, are the man people pay to flick through a selection of ageing paper and give your opinion as to what is real and what forged in their collection. It does not matter to her that this is a skill and an art...But try telling her that. Alex-Li is an Autograph Man. A little like being a munchkin, or a good witch or a flying monkey or a rabbi. Not much, without your belief.[8]

Collecting - and Alex's role as both collector and dealer - is considered intrinsically strange, like 'a munchkin or a good witch or a flying monkey'. It is of no interest to active members of society and indeed the mechanics of it take place hidden from public view: 'the greatest portion of Alex's work is done from home' (59). Isolated further by a violent spat with his girlfriend, Alex is portrayed firmly within the model of unsociable collector: 'You have no right to mine or anyone else's friendship, really, any more. You've finally disqualified yourself. That's what anti-social behaviour means, Alex, that's the result' says his childhood friend Adam (60). Even at the end of the novel, when Alex's trading success has bought him both financial reward and professional celebrity, he is, notes Smith, not elated by the discovery that 'he was at the centre of everything' but rather struck by 'the suggestion of a new type of loneliness, one harder to shake than its predecessor' (361).

Despite such enduring fictional presentations of the inadequacies of the collector, however, the collecting and display of objects has continued as a popular and highly visible activity. On the television, numerous programmes featuring

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[8] Zadie Smith, *The Autograph Man* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.59. Further references to this work are given in the body of the text.

auction rooms, car-boot sales, antique fairs and attic clearances exploit the complex desires evoked by objects and the subtle relationships between people and their things. In museums, the recognition of these impulses led to a series of exhibitions during the 1990s which replaced the rarefied object of the traditional museum collection with the highly personal, frequently commonplace and sometimes bizarre collections amassed by the public. Beginning with 'Collectamania' at Stevenage Museum in 1989 and 'The People's Show' at Walsall Museum and Art Gallery in 1990, the decision to show an eclectic variety of objects loaned by the public and displayed with much of the etiquette and rhetoric of a museum's permanent collection, led finally to a nationwide festival of 'People's Shows' in 1994. Displaying over half a million objects from around five hundred collectors, the exhibitions took place simultaneously in fifty museums, giving a more or less nationwide profile to largely small-scale collectors.[9] Not, perhaps, since the member-driven exhibitions of the Mechanics' Institutes or Literary and Philosophical Societies at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, had the fascinations of individuals been displayed so visibly, nor individual collectors been so influential since the foundation of many of the regional mid-Victorian museums. The People's Shows recalled the models of the 1860s and 1870s which energetically sourced objects from local benefactors, and which offered the validation and encouragement of personal narratives through public display.

One of the things the People's Shows demonstrated, as had the emerging

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[9] Interestingly, in the press at least, the equivocal response to the collector continued. *Hello!* magazine headlined its notice for 'Carry on Collecting' at the Museum of London with 'Secret Obsessions of Display' (19 March 1994), while the press release for the Walsall exhibitions noted 'the secret obsessions of otherwise normal people' and 'secret hoardes' on display. See Robin Francis, 'The People's Show: A Critical Analysis', *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 1 (May 1996).

regional museums over a century earlier, was the difficulty in attaching unequivocal values to objects. The desire to possess, collect or display could not be reduced to a direct response to the aesthetic quality or historical significance of an object. Personal meanings necessarily intruded, and the fine was inevitably exhibited alongside the crude and the kitsch. What the People's Shows confirmed was that the enduring fascination which we demonstrate for our objects is only in part an appreciation of design, craftsmanship and manufacture, a passion for what Ruskin termed 'the action of the hand at its finest, with that of the heart at its fullest'.[10] In part, it is also a fascination grounded less in aesthetic merit and more in a curiosity about the human condition and the things which help us know and define ourselves. For all his preoccupation with fine workmanship and beauty of form, Ruskin also recognised the intrinsic fascination which draws us to collect and display, at home and in public, the 'simplest objects'.[11] The ordered narratives of the nineteenth-century museum; the fictional environments defined by objects; the clutter of the Victorian parlour; the ubiquitous display of everything from travellers' souvenirs of uncertain value to the carefully-constructed collections of priceless curiosities, all demonstrate our apparently unshakeable belief in the object's special ability to inspire, influence and even embody us, 'to stay what is fleeting, and to enlighten what is incomprehensible...and to immortalize things that have no duration'.[12]

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[10] John Ruskin, 'Two Paths', in *Works*, 16, p.385.
[11] John Ruskin, 'Stones of Venice', in *Works*, 11, p.62.
[12] ibid.

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