Lost worlds: how the museum remembers

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In 1815, the French architectural theoretician, advocate and critic of the museum, Quatremère de Quincy, remarked about the museum visit: 'I find myself already, on entering this gallery, in the midst of a world that no longer is.' (quoted in Ernst 1996:126). At a time when many important museums were being established across Europe, Quatremère de Quincy realised that no archaeology – however meticulous, whether addressing and reclaiming textual or material artefacts – had the power to bring back the past. Despite the architectural vigour and panache of the museum, which was still in its infancy, the worlds it framed were always already irretrievably lost. The lost worlds I invoke in the title of my talk aren't those of antediluvian landscapes and extinct beasts but the primordial chaos seems comparable. The past survives as an accumulation of fragments, a palimpsest that enters the museum to be stored, catalogued, deciphered and displayed. So how does the museum remember, piece together some sort of history?

Contrary to popular belief, texts and objects do not speak for themselves. Or at least not audibly and coherently. Maybe they murmur of the lost world that they were once part of. But for these murmurings to become audible documents and artefacts need to be framed, in more ways than one. Svetlana Alpers has argued that the museum engenders particular 'ways of seeing' (Alpers 1991). It has developed rhetorics of display that tell us what to look at. The museum's equivalent of the directed gaze or the pointed index finger is the plinth that presents the isolated object. It is spot-lit to attract our attention but simultaneously encased in glass or cordoned off. All we are invited to do is look; the object is isolated, elevated, safe from our touch and that of time and decay. When encountering the object we are not allowed to be a doubting Thomas who felt the need to touch, to thrust his fingers into the wound of Christ in order to comprehend the miracle of the Resurrection. We are not allowed to trust touch over look in our encounter with the museum object. Nor can we be the fairytale prince that reawakens the beautiful object, freeing it from its glass coffin with a kiss (figure 1).

How then is the object's dormant beauty awakened? As we have seen, our attention is drawn to the object by the use of several framing devices: the plinth, the glass case, the spotlight. They invite us to look at the object. They don't, however, tell us what to look for in the object. To answer this question the isolated and elevated object needs to be framed even further. It is framed not as suspect but enlisted as witness. In the gallery space the object is tied into a sequence which it helps to authenticate and verify. This sequence is often both taxonomy and narrative, a history of some kind. If, as Quatremère de Quincy asserted, we encounter lost worlds in museums then I want to ask, what do we make of those lost worlds. What kind of looking are we invited to do? I secretly hope it's this kind: impeded, reflexive, fragmented, a both/and of complexity and contradiction – to borrow Robert Venturi's terms – and hopefully one of comprehension (figure 2). Here the act of looking becomes a reflexive exercise. It seems the object of contemplation is almost secondary to the reflection it may engender. And yet it is precisely the framed object that triggers reflection: a deflected looking – both inflected and redirected – that may open up new and surprising possibilities of comprehension.

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When looking for culture's lost worlds, most roads lead to Rome. Let me situate our archaeological exploration in a wider cultural context and introduce the city of Rome as locus and metaphor: a cultural and conceptual touchstone to which we will return from time to time.

In the late 1790s, as Napoleon's armies were despoiling Italy and carrying off the treasures of Rome to the newly established Louvre Museum in Paris, Quatremère de Quincy deplored the poverty of the museum as an instrument of cultural memory. He rejected the deliberate and violent dismembering of Rome's cultural fabric and argued instead for the importance of a layered cultural landscape no museum display could ever hope to rival or replicate: for Quatremère de Quincy the historical palimpsest of Rome's complex geography was the true museum (Ernst 1996: 115). To lift objects from this context meant to mute and mutilate them. The dismembering made a re-membering impossible. Memory itself was under threat.

When Sigmund Freud ruminated on the workings of memory in the first chapter of Civilization and Its Discontents, he drew on an architectural analogy. He evoked the complex layering of Rome's urban landscape.

we cannot help wondering what traces of those early stages can still be found by a modern visitor to Rome – whom we will credit with the best historical and topographical knowledge. He will see Aurelian's wall virtually unchanged, save for a few gaps. Here and there he will find stretches of the Servian wall that have been revealed by excavations. Because he commands enough knowledge – more than today's archaeologists – to be able to trace the whole course of this wall and enter the outlines of Roma quadrata in a modern city plan. … One need hardly add that all these remnants of ancient Rome appear as scattered fragments in the jumble of the great city that has grown up in recent centuries, since the Renaissance. True, much of the old is still there, but buried under modern buildings. This is how the past survives in historic places like Rome (Freud 2002: 8).

According to Freud, the modern city is a rich tapestry woven from different fabrics and to patterns that have changed over time. The skilled visitor can see the warp and weft, the different stitches and added patches. Depending on the visitor's degree of knowledge –

and Freud was generously endowing his visitor with more knowledge than today's archaeologists – she can imagine all of those superimposed onto each other. History is manifest in such complex layering. The act of looking is here a knowledgeable one. The archaeology of the city is understood, its parts traced and identified, the whole reconstructed in the mind. The city's history is replayed, almost like a computer simulation that reveals the different epochs as they melt into one another.

Against this image of gradual transformation, Freud invites us 'to make the fantastic assumption that Rome is not a place where people live, but a psychical entity with a similarly long, rich past, in which nothing that ever took shape has passed away' (p. 8). To illustrate the workings of the mind, Freud's Rome is now one of total simultaneity. Here all developmental stages are seen to exist together: 'occupying the same ground would be the church of Maria sopra Minerva and the ancient temple over which it is built' (p. 9). After spinning out this 'fantastic assumption', he concludes:

the result would be unimaginable, indeed absurd. If we wish to represent a historical sequence in spatial terms, we can do so only by juxtaposition in space, for the same space cannot accommodate two different things. Our attempt to do otherwise seems like an idle game; its sole justification is to show how far we are from being able to illustrate the peculiarities of mental life by visual means (p. 9).

Freud admits that the analogy with the archaeology of Rome can only go so far to illustrate the workings of the mind which retains every memory trace, however deeply buried it may be. It is precisely the limitation of this archaeological analogy, however, that I want to draw your attention to. The representation of history in spatial terms precludes overlaps and superimpositions. Objects can only exist side by side. That is indeed how they exist in the museum, history's lost world that we now need to return to.

I want to look at some of the ways in which the museum has framed objects. We have already encountered the basic grammar of such framing: the plinth, the glass case, the spotlight. Let's now look at the stories that can be constructed with such grammatical tools. I shall ask how are objects tied into narratives, what stories are they made to tell and how do they represent history or histories even. Archaeology shall remain the conceptual and concrete object of our investigation. This seems an appropriate modality when dealing with lost worlds. I have chosen to focus on two quite different museums: the Glyptothek in Munich and the Sir John Soane's Museum in London. They offer diametrically opposed perspectives on the central question: the representation of history. Out of the historical record – its shards, fragments and chaos – they construct quite different histories.

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The Glyptothek (1815-30) is a typical example of nineteenth-century museum architecture (figure 3). It offers a grand narrative: the story of sculpture from its classical beginnings to the present day. The museum was the brain child of Ludwig, crown prince of Bavaria. Inspired by his visits to the museums of Paris and Rome in 1804-5, the prince hatched plans to establish a museum of sculpture. After his return to Munich, he set about acquiring an impressive collection of Greco-Roman sculpture with the help of a team of advisers (Wünsche 1980).

In 1814 an architectural competition was staged to select an architect for the new museum building. Leo von Klenze won the competition. Unlike his competitors, Klenze had carefully thought about how to frame the collection. He proposed three different facades for the museum: Greek, Roman and Renaissance. Importantly he justified his choices not on the grounds of style alone but with recourse to the history of collecting and display (Leinz 1980: 136-39). The Greek style, he argued, best reflected the nature of the collections; the Roman invoked the public display spaces of ancient Rome in the imperial baths and elsewhere; the Renaissance design suggested a period of avid collecting activity and reappreciation of the antique. From a wide array of quite different historical resonances, the Greek style was chosen. Arguably it suggests the most straightforward representation of the relationship between content and container.

Inside the museum, the history of sculpture unfolded clockwise from Egypt through the various stages of the Greek and Roman epochs to works by contemporary artists such as Canova, Thorvaldsen, and the Germans Schadow and Rauch. The route was linear and chronologically arranged along the museum's four wings (figure 4). It brought the visitor full circle. Once returned to the beginning the visitor had taken in the history of western sculpture: a continuous development destined to culminate in contemporary production.

The highlight in this development was the art of ancient Greece. Here the museum had made an unprecedented acquisition with the so-called Aegina marbles (Wünsche 1980: 49-62). The archaic pediment sculptures from the Aphaia Temple on the island of Aegina constituted rare examples of dateable Greek sculpture. Their stylistic archaism and fragmented state accorded them low aesthetic value. But as historical artefacts they were priceless. In the museum's narrative of the historical development of sculpture they acquired pride of place as genuine Greek works. They replaced Johann Joachim Winckelmann's system of stylistic attribution with clear hard historical fact. As pediment sculptures of a well documented temple they possessed a definitive date. In the eyes of contemporaries, their historical value by far superseded their aesthetic value. This shift was highlighted in the contextual display (figure 5). The sculptures were grouped on two pedestals that had roughly the same length as the temple's two pediments. Thus they were presented as part of an architectural setting. This impression was underscored by the room's decoration scheme which showed the temple front both in the frescoed lunette and in a coloured relief replica installed on the gallery wall. Here the visitor was invited to imagine the fragmented groups as part of an architectural whole. The sculpture's pristine marble whiteness was also challenged in this reconstruction which aimed to show the original garish colour scheme.

The Glyptothek presented the history of sculpture as a progressive narrative which developed without deviation or hesitation, from ancient Egypt to contemporary production. The museum's notion of history was linear and teleological, abstracted from the chaotic and fragmented record. This narrative presented the achievements of contemporary German sculptors as sitting deservedly and proudly in a line of succession that included some of the all-time greats. In the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic era, this cultural history was of course also deeply political. It presented the young Bavarian kingdom – founded in 1806 – as a civilised nation whose artistic production rivalled that of antiquity. Thus endowing the young state with legitimacy and lineage.

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We need to return to Rome once more for our next museum inspiration. In 1778 the young John Soane arrived in Rome, the coveted destination of all grand tourists of the time. He was an ambitious architect who wanted to make his mark on the profession. Soane regarded his time in Italy as the happiest of his life. It brought him face to face with the awesome remains of classical antiquity, informed his particular take on classicism and secured him important patrons who would shower him with commissions on his return to England (figure 6). The two years spent in Italy were the most formative period of Soane's life, never to be repeated or forgotten (Darley 1999: 32-33).

An avid collector of antique sculpture, architectural fragments and books, Soane established his own museum in 1813. It was gifted to the Nation and has remained virtually unchanged since the architect's death in 1837. The museum exemplifies Soane's complex and playful explorations of history: it is treasure trove, souvenir and architectural teaching tool, and represents a complex intertwining of the private, professional and public. In some ways this is nowhere more perceptively portrayed than in Soane's peculiar document, entitled 'Crude Hints Towards the History of My House' (written in 1812) in which he imagined his yet to be completed house and museum in ruins (Soane 1999).

The text is narrated by the figure of the antiquarian who is investigating the site, like an archaeologist would an excavation. As he scrambles around the ruins he conjures up a wild and fanciful range of classical references, among them: antique Rome and Piranesi's imagined prisons (figures 6 and 7). Out of the ruins, Soane's narrator creates a place of fantasy and fiction inspired by the antique and the visual and textual imagination of some of the eighteenth-century's most compelling minds: Piranesi and the authors of the gothic novel. As the antiquarian tries to discover the former use of the building and to find out who occupied it, history is retrieved out of rubble and ruin; fragments are pieced together in fanciful interpretations.

Soane's text is fascinating for several reasons. It combines history and story, the factual and the fictional. It also reveals an interest in the history and pre-history of architecture as well as a cyclical notion of history. As so often in his architectural practice, Soane contemplates origins and endings simultaneously. The museum's inception, its demise and consequent interpretation out of the fragmented record are viewed as one almost. This reflects the practices of classicism itself which constantly seek inspiration from an architecture it can only ever contemplate in pieces. Hence the fantasy of the museum in ruins returns it to the inspirational origins of classicism: the palimpsest of Rome.

The museum re-enacts the experience of archaeology: both its didactic benefit and its more emotional appeal. It favours the fragment and the chaos of discovery. The display is a riot of architectural pieces, busts and urns. We come up close to gigantic architectural fragments without having to perch on a ladder that is precariously leaning against a temple's mighty column (figure 8). Here close scrutiny of architectural ornament is possible. We are invited to take out our sketch books and become students of architecture. The baffling array of objects functions as a study collection both for the apprentices who worked in Soane's office and for the Royal Academy's students of architecture. In the museum's narrow passages the references to Rome are palpable. We scramble through dimly lit crypts and catacombs. Shafts of light fall through grills in the floors above and gently animate the penumbra. This area of the museum attempts to capture the excitement of visiting some of Rome's more atmospheric archaeological sites (figure 9). In the basement the archaeological analogies continue. The columns flanking the entrance to

the crypt seem sunken into the ground. If we were occupying ground level we'd never find ourselves almost on eye-level with those Corinthian capitals (figure 10). This suggests that the ground we're walking on is in fact sedimented upwards. If we took out a spade and started digging we might make some surprising discoveries here. It also of course suggests that Soane's intervention on the site interacts with previous layers of history and architecture.

The basement harbours a surprise. Soane, the architect, is not the only occupant of the house it seems. A certain Padre Giovanni, Soane's alter ego, haunts the monk's parlour. He was the last occupant of a monastery once established on the site whose ruined remains we glimpse in the adjacent yard (figure 11), so Soane's lengthy description of the house and museum of 1835 tells us (Soane 1835: 27-29). The gloomy monk's parlour with its extensive collection of medieval fragments and the narrative of the monastery's ruins play on the conventions of the Gothic novel whose intricate plot lines and surprise encounters seem scripted into this corner of Soane's house.

The house and museum are at once self-portrait and autobiography; travel narrative and souvenir; a tribute to the splendour of past cultures and academic teaching tool. The linearity of the public narrative so grandly enacted in the Glyptothek is here replaced by the maze and the excitement and hazards of archaeology itself. As Soane's antiquarian demonstrated, the process of discovery will set free speculation and association, revealing dark secrets, multiple personalities and quite literally skeletons in the cupboard. The representation of history is attempted in a way that recalls Freud's admission that the mind forgets nothing. There is no neat side by side of objects here. Spaces are interpenetrated, outside and inside blur, floors are grills or seem sediments rather than true foundations, mirrors reflect structures, make them permeable, seemingly impermanent, hallucinatory. Maybe Freud was wrong when he asserted that we're unable 'to illustrate the peculiarities of mental life by visual means'. The Sir John Soane's Museum's complex use of space and its riotous displays seem like a three-dimensional model of the creative mind. Objects fuse with the multivalent narratives on offer. They are tied into a rich framework of association, fact and fiction. A framework, as Soane himself knew, that is best enjoyed in the speculation of discovery. This is exemplified in the antiquarian's visit to the ruined site. The ruins and fragments inspire an imaginative response that attempts to tease out as well as to invent meanings. Association, fantasy, fiction and fragment rule.

History is here conceived as story, at once public and private, factual and fictional. We are always invited to dig deeper and unearth another indelible memory trace. The past is a lost world that cannot be reconstructed. But its fragmented chaos is regarded as inspirational. It can be reimagined and reinterpreted in complex and productive ways. The object is not a seamlessly restored whole that is part of a linear narrative but a scarred object – fragment or ruin even – that speaks of the passage of time.

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By way of conclusion, let me offer some inconclusive ruminations on the museum's ruins and the possibility of memory. Instead of the dead world of the gallery Quatremère de Quincy advocated a contextual approach to history which focused on the site. For him, Rome was the perfect museum. Pitching object against context and privileging the one over the other ultimately ignores the fact – so memorably argued by Martin Heidegger – that the past itself is irretrievable. Even on location, the past remains past. Heidegger claimed 'the world of the work that stands there has perished. World-withdrawal and world-

decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the same as they once were.' (Heidegger 2001: 40).

The museum as ruin is a trope as old as the museum itself. In 1796 Hubert Robert exhibited two pendant paintings showing the Grand Galerie of the Louvre. One view depicted the gallery space with projected improvements to the lighting which were finally to be implemented during the nineteenth century. The other showed the Grand Galerie in ruins. Destruction is near total; we're faced with a desolate scene. Some figures scramble about while others warm themselves at an open fire. Amongst the debris of broken sculpture, the statue of the Apollo Belvedere has remained intact. An artist is absorbed in the task of sketching this icon of classical antiquity.

The works present two future states, maybe one following on from the other: a reminder of history's inevitable cycle of rise and fall. But might the gallery in ruins not also point to the impossibility of recontextualisation? The storehouse of history cannot retrieve lost worlds, nor can it escape the processes of decay and destruction. But even amidst such gloomy realisations, the sketching artist testifies to the power of the object to transcend time and place. The decontextualised object has become monument and inspiration. As in the case of the Apollo Belvedere in Robert's painting, the historical object emerges from a past that no longer is, a time and place in ruins. And yet it exerts an inspirational power over a new generation of artists. As Didier Maleuvre suggests, 'All that the museum has to offer history is homelessness, homelessness as the basis of historical existence' (Maleuvre 1999: 63). In some ways, the trope of the ruin reflects the state of homelessness. It takes us back to Soane's description of his house and museum in ruins. The context fragmented and open to speculation generates new reflections, associations and histories to replace history.

Although the trope of the museum in ruins is as old as the museum itself, it only started figuring recently in the architecture of the museum. James Stirling's Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart – opened in 1984 and hailed as the quintessential postmodern museum – offers two ways of seeing that are analogous to those of Freud's imaginary visitor to Rome who is able to see the past in the present. Or more correctly, able to piece together the past from the present.

Unlike its nineteenth-century predecessors, the Neue Staatsgalerie does not have a homogenous façade. As one architectural critic remarked, it's a faceless building (Vidler 1994: 85; quoting Colin Rowe). The main feature of the entrance pavilion is a large curved glass wall which refracts and fragments anything it encounters (figure 12). Inside, however, the galleries are surprisingly traditional; arranged as an enfilade they seem to speak of history's linearity and progression. The fractured entrance and conventional galleries do not really prepare one for the museum's centre: the sculpture court (figure 13). When one pays close attention to the architectural language deployed here, the courtyard reads like

a sunken rotunda. Half overgrown and decayed, it lies at the heart of the museum. It recalls the classic trope of museum architecture best exemplified in Friedrich von Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin: the central domed rotunda. The once internal structure is now exposed to the elements, the dome missing. Such a reading presupposes Freud's knowing visitor capable of reconstructing the history of the site out of the visible remains, filling in the gaps in the Aurelian wall so to speak. These resonances are only gradually revealed and remain invisible to many visitors who do not command the knowledge necessary to unlock them. All is revealed most fully from an impossible perspective such as ballooning over the building would bestow. From up here, the lineage is clear. The suggested ruin connects Stirling's museum not only to the history of museum architecture but also to a wider architectural culture which sought its inspiration in the remains of classical antiquity.

The facelessness of the building invites reflection. As does the building's suggested ruination. These encompass History with a capital H as well as more private ruminations. Histories rather than History. Stirling's Neue Staatsgalerie seems to bring together the two different modes of the museum embodied in the Glyptothek and the Sir John Soane's Museum. Despite the traditional layout of the permanent galleries, with their suggestion of teleological progression, the invoked ruination inflects such grand narratives. The museum is here written into the workings of time and history's cycle of rise and fall. Robert's two states of the Grand Galerie, present and future, seem merged in Stirling's building. The present is built on ruins and will be transformed into ruins.

Despite the impossibility of preserving historical context, the museum re-members in various ways. I've chosen to discuss two such very different ways. The progressive teleology of the Glyptothek, which has become the archetypal narrative of the national museum, and the multivalent and idiosyncratic approach of the Sir John Soane's Museum. Both home and museum, it combines the private and the public, fact and fiction. It invites speculation and association and simulates the experience of archaeology, its surprise discoveries, cavernous sites and jumbled fragments. Whilst Stirling has drawn on both modes of the museum, more recently architects have begun to invest the architecture of the museum with an understanding of its own demise and transience. A self-reflexivity that might help to counter Quatremère de Quincy's bleak remark: 'I find myself already, on entering this gallery, in the midst of a world that no longer is.'

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