

The Royal Society of Edinburgh
Cultural Flagships Series Discussion Forum (3)
Cultural Flagships: Being a 'National' – Museums and Galleries
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Report by Joyce McMillan

The forum was introduced by Lord Wilson of Tillyorn, President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, who thanked Professors Jan McDonald FRSE and Adrienne Scullion FRSE for their work on the National Flagships seminar series, and handed over to the Chair for the evening to Professor Duncan Macmillan FRSE of the University of Edinburgh, who is also chief visual arts critic of *The Scotsman*, and former Curator of the Talbot Rice Gallery, the University of Edinburgh.

Professor Macmillan introduced the debate by drawing attention to the recent controversy over the raising of funds to keep the Titian painting *Diana and Actaeon* on public display in Scotland. He quoted the view of Iain Smith MSP, Liberal Democrat Culture spokesman, that the painting is hardly worth saving for Scotland, because it has no real Scottish connection. "It's not even as if it was by Jock McTitian", the MSP was quoted as saying. Professor Macmillan said that this controversy reminds us of the questions faced daily by those responsible for running 'national' galleries and museums in the 21st century, who often find themselves at the cutting edge of debates about national identity and culture.

Professor Macmillan then introduced the four speakers. He pointed out that Belfast-born John Leighton, Director-General of the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS), is the first trained painter to occupy that post for many decades, and outlined his career before he took over at NGS in 2006, which ranged from student years at Edinburgh University, Edinburgh College of Art and the Courtauld Institute, to periods at the National Gallery in London, and the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Enrique Juncosa, Director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), was born in Majorca, and has previously worked in Valencia, and at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid. Dr Gordon Rintoul, Director of National Museums Scotland (NMS), is currently presiding over a major refurbishment of the Royal Museum building in Chambers Street. And Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, was brought up in Glasgow, before studying for the Scottish bar, and moving into the world of fine arts via the University of Edinburgh, the Courtauld Institute and the University of Reading. He was Director of the National Gallery in London before moving to the British Museum in 2002. Professor Macmillan said that many of the exhibitions Neil MacGregor has presented at the British Museum have shown a strong sense of topicality, including the current exhibition on *The Remaking of Iran in the early 17th century*.

Professor Macmillan added that in his view culture is the essential element from which politics grows, and that politics is only a function of culture. He therefore felt that the approach to national culture of those running major national museums and galleries is of profound importance, and looked forward to hearing the views of such a distinguished group of speakers on a subject so critical to our future.

John Leighton

John Leighton began by pointing out that the National Galleries of Scotland are approaching an important birthday; they are due to celebrate their 150th anniversary in March 2009. He said that when the galleries first opened in 1859, there was general agreement that there was a compelling need for the public in Scotland to have access to great works of art; but there was no great consensus – if any at all – about what the content of the collection should be. There was a feeling

that the gallery should be not only a force for encouraging artistic achievement within Scotland, but also a potent sign of distinction to the nation. *The Scotsman*, at the time, said that the purpose of the collection should be “to teach art and elevate taste”; but added that in these respects, the existing collections were “quite useless”.

Initially, the galleries had little or no acquisition funding, and depended almost entirely on gifts and bequests. The aim, though, was clearly to acquire the finest examples of international art that could be bought or gifted; the remit became more complex later, with the general growth of nationalism, and of indigenous Scottish schools of painting. Early directors were soon complaining that the prices of ‘old masters’ were becoming prohibitive, so the debate on acquisitions and spending priorities began early. There were also strong class attitudes in the early management of the galleries. Directors used to employ extra security staff on public holidays, when the working classes might be expected to visit; and in every sense, the lower orders received only a ‘guarded’ welcome from management.

Nowadays, of course, things have moved on. John Leighton is concerned that it should be clear that these are not the ‘National Galleries of Edinburgh’. He is interested in the mission of creating galleries “without walls”, whose collections become visible and accessible throughout the country. The gallery, he said, should not be a “self-contained treasure chest”, but should form part of a wider network across the nation and beyond. He hoped to see more collaborations with other collections, both in Scotland and elsewhere.

He felt that the Galleries are, in the broadest sense, educational institutions, and that a continuing relationship with contemporary Scottish art should be one of the foundations of the Galleries’ work. They also play a crucial role in supporting the nation’s tourist industry.

Mr Leighton said, in conclusion, that questions of national identity are always challenging, and should be so. The temptation is to try to use institutions such as museums and galleries to simplify national identity, and define it in narrow ways. The duty of the institutions is to resist that, and to insist on the complexity of their role, and of the culture they record and reflect. And he added that he is delighted by the purchase of the Titian painting, which he described as “a sign of ambition, as well as a great work of art.”

Enrique Juncosa

Mr Juncosa began by observing that people often use the term ‘nationalism’ in a pejorative way, and always of others, never of themselves. He said he is also wary of the “same everywhere” culture in modern art, where similar exhibitions move around a fashionable circuit from Berlin to Paris to London to New York, and seem to have no real identity. He argued that the easiest way to have a distinctive identity is to put some emphasis on the national dimension of a collection, and said that at IMMA, he aims to assemble the best possible collection of contemporary Irish art, in a good international context. The general collection can be excellent, but the Irish one can reasonably aim to be the best in the world.

The Irish Museum of Modern Art was founded in 1991 with a very small acquisition fund, and in its early years tended to use this to buy contemporary art from outside Ireland, along with some contemporary Irish work. Mr Juncosa has tried to fill in the gaps, updating the collection with neglected Irish material created between the 1940s – the terminal date of the collections in the National Gallery of Ireland – and the 1990s. He also observed that when he was appointed to his post in 2003, one newspaper article was published objecting to his appointment, and saying that it was disgraceful that a foreigner should hold such a post. But that was the only hostility he encountered, and he has found the Irish arts community very supportive.

He is currently collecting mainly Irish artists, including those with Irish connections who live elsewhere - Northern Ireland, North America, etc. Mr Juncosa noted the paradox that while people in Spain see England, France and Germany as the essence of Europe, British people seem very reluctantly European. In Ireland, though, people are responsive to the European dimension and

enjoy making European links, and Mr Juncosa has also linked Ireland through exhibitions to other 'new' or recently independent countries, including India and Pakistan. A museum in Ireland, he concluded, has to be Irish; and it also has to be much more than that.

Gordon Rintoul

Gordon Rintoul began by observing how wide-ranging the National Museums Scotland's collections are, and how this reflects the history of Scotland, and the importance in our national story of Empire, science and technology. He argued that national storytelling is always fraught with different viewpoints, and that there are pitfalls in telling a story through artifacts. There is, for example, not much about William Wallace in the National Museum of Scotland, because there are no objects in the collection relating to him; at the time of the opening of the Museum the current First Minister had made vigorous comments about the relative lack of a focus on Wallace. History is a contested place. When Australia's National Museum opened in 2001, there were so many protests and disputes that a government commission had to be appointed to investigate, and the row led to the departure of the Director.

Dr Rintoul therefore felt that, in the first place, it is essential for a national museum, particularly in a small country, to engage in the continuing debate about the history of the nation, and to provide a forum for that discussion. It should offer not just the story of an imagined past, but an opportunity to understand the past through a range of different voices, including those recorded through oral history and on film.

Secondly, the national museum should have a role as a national resource, with a vigorous loans programme to other museums and institutions across the country. The National Museum currently has more than 2,500 objects out on loan to various institutions, and is particularly pleased that the collection known as St Ninian's Treasure has recently returned to Shetland for the first time since its rediscovery in the 1950s.

Thirdly, the museum should be involved in supporting and enabling others, particularly smaller museums across Scotland.

In the fourth place, the institution should be mindful that being national means being international, if Scotland's story is to be told in full. International exchange and linkage is of central importance. Dr Rintoul said that he hoped the revamped Royal Museum building would reflect this international perspective very strongly - for example, there was an exhibition in 2008 called *Extremes*, about the Hudson's Bay Company of Canada, featuring 250 items, many of them brought back from northwest Canada by Scots involved in the history of the company. The exhibition coincided with a land claim by the Tlicho people of the area around Yellowknife, whose representatives visited Edinburgh during the exhibition; the whole event was particularly moving and well received.

And in the fifth place, Dr Rintoul argued that being national should mean being a centre for the creation and sharing of knowledge, particularly through research around the museum's substantial science collection. Research activities could range from straightforward history of science to contemporary research in natural sciences, using the museum's collections as a resource, and there are exciting possibilities in this area.

Dr Rintoul concluded that national status and national funding also bring national responsibilities, and that national institutions such as National Museums Scotland should seek to act as a force for good, both nationally and internationally.

Neil MacGregor

Neil MacGregor used historical and contemporary images of the British Museum to illustrate his speech, and began by reflecting on the values and ideas which helped inspire the museum's foundation at Montague House in 1753. He showed an image of the steeple of St. George's

Church, Bloomsbury, close to the museum, with its statue of King George I at the very pinnacle of the steeple, and reflected that the museum was founded at a time when people were determined to strengthen and consolidate the idea of the nation - the question of "which nation?" had after all been tested as recently as 1745. Mr MacGregor showed a particularly powerful picture of the public execution of Jacobite lords at Tower Hill following the rebellion of that year, and said that in the 1750s, the great and the good of Britain were essentially saying "Here are the ideas we will promote, and here are the much larger group of ideas we will not mention, in order to be able to live together."

The museum was created by a vote of Parliament, not by Royal Charter, and was to be run by independent Trustees, not royal appointees. The mood in Parliament was of the need to create a society and forge a nation; Mr MacGregor reflected that interest in the idea of a national museum often comes from the sense that we have a notion of how we want our people to be, and want a museum that in some way reflects that story and that aspiration. The real purpose was to create, not recount, a national story, and it is striking that the Trustees were not to be part of government, but free and independent. They were to be funded by government, but not controlled by it. At the time, a Royal institution would have excluded everyone who was Nonconformist, Catholic or Jewish, and the foundation of the British Museum was an important step away from that.

In the years since 1753, the nations of Britain have changed dramatically, but the objects assembled in the collections still allow us to tell different and competing stories about our history and our society. The idea is that different populations within the nation can look at all the stories in one place, and begin to get a sense of how they fit together. This is the work that any national museum has to embody, and national museums must resist any "nationalism" that makes that coexistence difficult. A good example lies in attitudes to Africa, which has gone from being patronised as a primitive backwater to being recognised as the mother of all human cultures, partly through the study of fine artifacts found there.

In Neil MacGregor's view, the objects are there in the museum precisely in order to allow different narratives, and resisted narratives, to be presented; and the civic value of that process is very great indeed. He said that in London, one person in 20 is now of sub-Saharan African origin and that this is the fastest-growing part of the city's population. He showed a memorable picture of an African study day at the British Museum, featuring a huge crowd of people, including thousands of Londoners of African origin, gathered to hear music and presentations in the museum's main courtyard. "Our job," said Mr MacGregor, "is to complicate narratives, and to remind people of how complex they are."

He added that museums need the resources to make collections available throughout the country and beyond. The idea that the British Museum should bring together artifacts 'native and foreign' was enshrined in the original Act of Parliament founding the museum, and today the collection should be consultable world-wide. Mr MacGregor said, in conclusion, that these remain great ideals, and that both the history and the potential of the British Museum help to demonstrate what such a collection could achieve in the civic realm.

Questions and Answers

Professor Sir Alan Peacock FRSE opened the discussion, from the audience, by pointing out that the idea of a "national" institution implies some continuing public debate about the organisation's purpose and priorities. He welcomed the fact that museums and galleries have become more interactive in terms of the experience of visitors, but wondered how that need for wider public debate and participation could be expressed in the governance of institutions.

He also questioned whether some of the activities of museums are not taking on a political education role which could become dangerous. Is it not possible, for example, that the current Iran exhibition at the British Museum is running this risk?

Neil MacGregor said that there is no question of proselytising, either in the Iran exhibition or in any other aspect of the British Museum's work. The public receive the information, and literally informs itself through the experience. The idea is to try to understand contemporary Iran through its past. The response or conclusions depend on the individual visitor.

Dr Rintoul said that there is no intention of telling people what to think. His intention is rather that the NMS should act as a forum for debate. Participation and interaction must be good for the institution, and there is now a far broader range of ways in which members of the public can become involved with the work of the museum.

Mr Juncosa said that there is not a simple canon of work which had to be shown, and that it is a matter of complex narratives.

Duncan Thomson, former Director of the National Portrait Gallery, then asked whether modern museums are speaking the language of inclusion, but failing to practise it. The museums themselves have become more accessible, but structural participation is being phased out - there are no longer trade union representatives on boards, for example.

Neil MacGregor said that the British Museum Board are Trustees, not representatives. They are there to defend the interests of the public, born and unborn. They need to be strong, so that they can fight government if necessary.

John Leighton pointed out that boards of trustees do not run museums – directors are responsible for the operations. Museums Boards have the responsibility to monitor and approve the broad strategy, policy and business plans and if they get too closely involved in the day-to-day operations then “all hell usually breaks loose”.

Gordon Rintoul said there are many ways of encouraging participation, for example through open meetings. It is important to offer the public a range of ways of engaging with the work of the museum.

The question was raised of the still rather forbidding image of formal galleries. Why do people still think only of official gallery spaces, when it came to displaying art or artifacts?

John Leighton said that he was very interested in this issue, which was why he had talked about the idea of the “gallery without walls”. There is a strong tradition of public sculpture in Britain, and of art in the environment at various sites. Mr Leighton felt that all of these developments help to make art more accessible and less intimidating.

Mr Juncosa said that the Irish Museum of Modern Art has an extensive programme of lending work from its collection to small towns across Ireland, some of which are using informal exhibition spaces such as garages and shop-fronts. The ‘national programme’, as it is called, is an increasingly important part of IMMA's work.

The question was raised of whether it is right to remove art-works from the places where they were created, and to keep them in other cities and countries. The questioner recounted the strange experience of seeing an ancient Persian temple reconstructed in a museum in Berlin, and wondering what on earth it was doing there.

John Leighton said that he thinks works of art acquire a resonance through being exhibited in a certain place, over time. It would make us much poorer, for example, if we could only ever see Venetian art exhibited in Venice; it should also be seen in other lights. There is also an element of surprise or disjunction - like the questioner's experience in Berlin - which can be revealing and enlightening.

Neil MacGregor suggested that the real question is about how we understand objects. The comparative method is a very powerful tool of understanding, and collections such as the British

Museum are founded on it. He argued that we cannot understand the world, and how different geographical areas and traditions relate to one another, unless objects are brought together for comparison. Cultures are contiguous, like a form of trade. They are shaped by contacts and exchanges, and unless we can see objects side by side, those relations will not be clear to us. The questioner wondered, though, whether the people of Benin feel like that about their bronzes, which have become the property of the British Museum and other galleries in the west.

Another questioner wondered how much sense of ownership people have in relation to their national galleries and museums, and how that could be fostered.

Gordon Rintoul said that the NMS has carried out substantial outreach work, for example with groups of women from the Chinese and Indian communities in Glasgow, although ethnic diversity is obviously not so strong a thread in Scottish life as it is in London.

A final questioner asked the speakers to reflect on the importance of private collectors who donate works to national galleries and museums. Among those mentioned were the Rockefeller, Burrell and Bridgewater bequests.

John Leighton said that he agreed that it is easy to forget that the stewardship of heritage is, and always has been, a public–private partnership. Many countries have national collections based on old royal collections, which have been nationalised or appropriated. But our royal family still has its own collection, and the national institutions have built up their own holdings through a combination of purchase, and generous gifts and bequests.

Gordon Rintoul agreed that the generosity of private donors is of huge benefit to the national collections, and recalled a Japanese company with a plant in Scotland generously donating a hugely valuable silicon ingot for a recent NMS exhibition.

Professor Macmillan then closed the formal debate, and invited Professor Jan McDonald to give the vote of thanks. She said that the discussion had been fascinating, and had made it clear that national galleries and museums have a very complex contract with the nations they serve. In a sense, they are there to help create a nation that can only exist if we suspend our disbelief, and allow ourselves to become something more than an imaginary community. She thanked all four speakers, and Professor Macmillan, for an outstanding debate.