Eclectic Collections

Un-disciplining the Museum

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ABSTRACT: This article argues for the potential of eclectic display, the critical juxtaposition of cross-disciplinary and achronological objects, to un-discipline the museum and allow existing collections to tell new stories. In response to sector-wide calls for new approaches to heritage, we suggest the value of literary studies both in identifying entrenched narratives, particularly those invoked by chronological organization and disciplinary divisions, and in offering new narratological structures (repetitive, marginal, peripatetic) that would complement and complicate existing, dominant narratives in museum display (such as progress or relationality). Though it is traditionally viewed as unruly or outmoded, we suggest instead that eclecticism could be an important tool for museums to respond to calls for change, such as decolonization, and contemporary crises, like the climate crisis, in an agile and cost-effective manner.

KEYWORDS: disciplinization, eclectic collections, heterogeneous collections, history of museums, periodization, specialization

In Glasgow's Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, a Spitfire airplane (1944) is suspended over an Asian elephant (1900). What story does this pairing tell? From a curatorial perspective, they are similarly large items, requiring for their display the height of an atrium. A historian might see them both as machines of war, with elephants possessing the far longer martial history. An ecologist might consider the environmental impact of fossil fuels alongside the devastation of the ivory trade, elephants and airplane similarly testifying to human impact on the environment. The story changes based on the teller, but each is potentially richer than the story told by airplane or elephant separately.

Displays like this one resist the accepted history of museums (e.g., Bennett 1995), which charts the progress from unruly Renaissance "cabinets of curiosity" to today's museums, either highly specialized (The Natural History Museum, London, but also regional institutions like the Museum of Whitby Jet or the Pen Museum, Birmingham) or rigidly divided by discipline and arranged in sequences that prioritize taxonomy and periodization (like the British Museum or National Museum of Scotland). Truly eclectic displays, like the one described above, are rare.

In what follows, we argue that eclectic collections are uniquely situated to elucidate the relationships between kinds of knowledge, and we therefore seek to use the eclectic museum to develop a new paradigm for interdisciplinary collaboration. We define "eclecticism" both by the breadth and diversity of the objects and by the juxtaposition of apparently very unlike objects, both on display and in stores. Eclecticism recalls the "cabinet of curiosity" model of museum, where a visitor might "go from the masterworks of the Parthenon straight up to the stuffed seal and buffalo," as one visitor to the British Museum in 1852 complained (quoted in Nichols 2015: 70). Many museums today have eclectic collections, but the display strategies adopted in most resist that eclecticism, attempting to create order through the imposition of disciplinary boundaries

and historicist principles. The National Museum of Scotland's outward-facing neatness can be contrasted with its Building 13, an off-site storehouse not open to the general public where a horse-drawn plough, fossil trackways, and parts of a spaceship mingle, awaiting opportunities for comparison.

Because our goal is to spur interdisciplinary conversation, our focus is on collections that straddle disciplines, particularly those that house both arts and sciences materials.[1] The eclectic collection is one that holds a wide and apparently incoherent set of objects; eclectic display is that which, like the elephant and the Spitfire, resists disciplinary categorization and traditional periodization. Our perspective is fundamentally informed by our own disciplinary backgrounds as literary critics: although we are not the first to suggest that literary forms structure historical understanding (e.g., White 1973: 2) or that museum displays might be understood textually (e.g., Bal 2001), we believe that English literature can offer fresh approaches to current discussions about how museums narrate their contents, histories, and purpose.

As we read them, eclectic collections suggest different possibilities for familiar objects and ideas, allowing us to ask new questions. It is well-recognized, after all, that interpretations of museum objects are informed by the other objects positioned nearby (Alberti 2005) and that "the ways in which objects are grouped" form one of numerous "*environmental* and *verbal* registers" through which displays interpret themselves to visitors (Whitehead 2012: xiv, xiii). Fascinating stories can be told through the surprising juxtaposition of very different objects or branches of study, though we stress that we are here interested in the critical juxtaposition of apparently unalike objects rather than random or motiveless groupings. Display of this kind, we argue, is liberatory; museums can redesign knowledge through deliberately anti-specialist juxtapositions, allowing objects to tell stories differently and so resist definitive configuration. By making a virtue of miscellaneity, eclectic display can reconnect and reenergize estranged modes of inquiry.

Disciplinary Ossification: Telling the Same Old Stories

In 2022, the International Council of Museums asked its members to reflect on "the transformative power of museums and their potential of bringing about positive change" (ICOM 2022a). Recent scholarship has begun to suggest possible ways existing collections might work toward a better future, including: a "futures turn" that recognizes that "the most pivotal role for museums may be in helping people to imagine their possible futures" (Decker 2020: 642); new forms of interdisciplinarity that present a "unified" perception of the world (Janes 2020: 590) and dismantle racially motivated boundaries like the distinction between anthropology and antiquity (Rose 2022); and new narratives which "productively disrupt and interrupt overarching institutional narratives" (Forni et al. 2019: 188).

As Ivan Gaskell (2016: 69) argues, these approaches are often hampered by "disciplinary ossification," a small-c conservative force within institutions of knowledge that limits how objects are understood and the stories they can tell. Equally, Susan A. Crane argues that the museum's potential to "foster myriad random encounters with the objects of knowledge" is restricted by "the institutional nature of the museum [that] has encouraged the construction of narratives that inhibit random access in favour of orderly, informative meaning-formation" (2000: 3). Those dominant narratives tend to be historical in nature. As Alice Stevenson notes, historical display has been "taken for granted" as the "seemingly intuitive" way of structuring many exhibitions, yet the presentation of "history as a path to the present" risks "allowing space for just a single, fixed perspective" (2022: 64). Crane thus argues that "[t]he museum should no longer be subjected to the paradigm of historical narrative, displaying instead its proper, archaeological, discontinuous, and modular mode of assembling words and objects" (2000: 18).

Modern museums inherit both historical narrative and conventional disciplinary divisions from the nineteenth-century museum. In this period, generally seen as "the birth" of the modern museum (e.g., Bennett 1995; Siegal 2008), heterogeneous collections were prized for their "universality." An 1891 pamphlet entitled *The Museums of the Future* lauded the British Museum for "its libraries, its pictures, its archaeological galleries, its anthropological, geological, botanical, and zoological collections"; this mixed collection represented "the most comprehensive interpretation" of the term "museum" (Goode 1891: 434). The idea that it was possible to collect and display everything informed the acquisition strategy of the British Museum throughout the nineteenth century.

In the end, however, this dream proved to be logistically unsustainable, with visitors already complaining by the middle of the century that the collections were "heaped together in disorderly piles, or neatly spread out with ingenious disregard of their relations" (*The Standard* 1853). In order to combat the chaos of the collection, the museum began to introduce clearer disciplinary divisions (separating the fine art of the Grecian marbles from the archaeological "curiosities" of Egypt and Assyria, for instance, or introducing the category of "ethnography" to the collection), and to organize those disciplines into chronological or progressive display, following the dominant trends in historiography of the period. The efforts to make sense out of the chaos of the universal collection eventually led to the museum's fragmentation into smaller, more coherent units: in 1825, the painting collection was removed to the National Gallery; in 1881, the natural history collections left for South Kensington; and in 1973, the library became a separate institution, moving to its current site at St. Pancras in 1997. Traditional accounts of museum history follow the progressive narratives prized in the Victorian museum itself. "The history of museums," writes Haidy Geismar, "tends to be presented in a linear narrative in which collections are ordered through increasingly systematic classification, at the same time becoming more public" (2018: 1). This teleological story serves to suggest that progress is synonymous with segmentation.

One side effect of this traditional view is that it implicitly denigrates the notion of what we have here termed the "eclectic collection." Trends across the twentieth century have accustomed the British public to specialized, coherent museums, leaving eclectic collections feeling outdated or unmanageable. What stories can one tell, after all, which include such varied items as Impressionist paintings, fossils of prehistoric life, Egyptian mummies, and motor cars (as in the Kelvingrove's collection, for instance)? How is one to negotiate this diversity, whether as curator, visitor, or academic? Scholarship, though (e.g., Gaskell 2016; Spijksma and Lehmann 2017), is increasingly alive to the potential of mixed display to challenge disciplinary hierarchies and foster new interpretations of objects. Museums, as the recent redesign of the British Museum's Enlightenment gallery shows, are also gradually becoming more skeptical of the category distinctions that became standard in the twentieth century.

In 2019, ICOM proposed a new definition of museum that would have moved attention away from traditional activities ("acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity") to instead emphasize museums as "polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures" (ICOM 2019)—provoking debate far beyond specialist circles (e.g., Heffer 2021). Yet, after consultation, ICOM chose in 2022 to adopt wording much closer to the old definition, a decision suggesting that competing visions of the ways museums and their collections can communicate have yet to be reconciled (ICOM 2022b). The heritage sector is going through a variety of simultaneous changes in response to questions of access, periods of extended closure, digitization, and high-profile public discussion of the responsibilities of museums as custodians (e.g., Art Fund 2020). Increasingly, museums are called on to address pressing social issues; for example, the cost-of-living crisis, the climate crisis, and racial injustice (as identified in Museums Galleries Scotland 2023). Yet Gaskell argues that while "museums used to be generators of big ideas, [they] are so no longer," the result of budgetary constraints and entrenched ideas about what a museum is and how it should be organized (2016: 55). Thus, Rodney Harrison, Caitlin DeSilvey, Cornelius Holtorf, and Sharon MacDonald have challenged the sector to find ways to do heritage "otherwise," "at odds with dominant, and dominating, modes of being" (2020: 7).

New Narratives

One potential answer to this challenge is to un-discipline heterogeneous collections in order to tell new stories. Despite recent calls for a new approach to museology that can reckon with the past and help shape the future (Harrison et al. 2020; Janes and Sandell 2019; Janes 2020), the potential of eclectic collections to create interdisciplinary narratives about the past, present, and future has so far been overlooked. Despite the repeated emphasis on the stories that objects and collections tell, meanwhile, literary criticism is largely untested as an approach to museology. Yet, as Wendy Shaw argues, "Where narrative structures within museum-display strategies are weak, the only meaning assigned to objects becomes their categorization, reducing the possibility of multiple readings" (2007: 254). We contend that by treating museums as texts

and using the tools of textual criticism, we can identify and thus critique the dominant narrative structures at work in today's museums and equally identify new, more experimental models that answer the call for "new ways of telling the story of the world" (Tokarczyk 2019: 3). These narratives, built out of the juxtaposition of objects across disciplines, can help museums address the issues the sector currently faces and make collections more adaptable to emerging future issues—and, importantly in the current UK climate, they can do so affordably.

As Sheldon Annis writes, "[a]s a kind of text that projects symbols and is meant to be read, interpreted, or experienced, a museum has its own set of qualities. Unlike a film, a book, or a painting, the museum's symbols are approachable from many directions (literally) and in an almost infinite number of sequences and combinations" (1987: 168). Traditional definitions of interdisciplinarity (Aboelela et al. 2007; Cheek 2021; Nersessian 2022) foreground the integration of disciplinary methods and perspectives, a form of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "monologism," in which a "multiplicity of creating forces" are integrated into "a single consciousness," producing unified meaning (1984: 82). In contrast, we position eclecticism as a kind of "dialogism," in which insights are produced out of the "multiplicity of consciousnesses" that "cannot be contained within a single consciousness" (Morson and Emerson 1990: 237). Here, interdisciplinarity is not the integration of disciplines but their juxtaposition, a process in which the value of difference is maintained rather than effaced. We seek to layer insights, rather than synthesize perspectives, to create what Bakhtin calls "polyphony": "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Bakhtin 1984: 6). By foregrounding museum objects as points of contact between disciplines, rather than as the property of any one discipline, and by drawing out the myriad stories to be told within collections at the same time, eclecticism can be a powerful tool for recontextualizing collections to address questions best answered by multiple disciplines together.

Narrative Models: A Provocation

Jordan Kistler argues elsewhere that museums employing chronological or sequential display borrow their structure from "the realist novel with its investment in seriality, causation, and personal growth" and particularly the *bildungsroman*, a narrative that follows the development of a hero or heroine from childhood into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity (Kistler 2022: 258). Thus, the *Earth's Past* exhibit at the Natural History Museum, London, takes visitors on a 545-million-year journey "through time," following the development of the exhibition's "hero" (the Earth) through a tumultuous past to reach its current "identity": "from the beginning of the universe as a tiny unimaginably hot fireball . . . to today's living planet of moving continents and seas."[2] Similarly, in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, a chronological display of obstetric equipment implicitly tells a story of development and progress, in which the "heroes" are science and technology, which enable advancement from barbaric-looking devices to sleek, modern, hygienic equipment. This is, of course, one possible story these objects can tell, but as the dominant narrative in the gallery it obscures other possible stories. As Donald Preziosi has argued, "historical time rendered in space as *sequence and succession*" serves to create "a syntactical relation between "present" and the "past" connected in a causal relationship of *incompletion and fulfilment*" (2012: 84). The museum's emphasis on progress, which implies that things are always improving, obscures, for instance, the continued inequality in maternal mortality rates in the UK, in which the mortality rate among Asian mothers is nearly double and Black mothers nearly triple that of white mothers (Oxford Population Health 2024). Economic background similarly impacts maternal mortality rates. Progress, then, has not benefited all women equally.

Also absent from this display of technological advancement are the women and infants on whom these devices were used. Here, disciplinary silos mean that scientific history is divorced from social history. Yet, the Hunterian Museums hold a very heterogeneous collection, spread across six sites divided roughly along disciplinary lines: the Hunterian Museum, the Hunterian Art Gallery, and the Hunterian Zoology Museum are among their venues. Within these diverse venues, to say nothing of the extensive closed stores, are numerous items that could, juxtaposed with the scientific equipment, reintroduce women and children to the story of obstetrics. The Hunterian's art collection contains a number of images of mothers

and children, such as *La Bonne mere* (The good mother) by Nicholas Delaunay (1779; GLAHA:19037), a print that is exactly contemporaneous with the obstetrics career of William Hunter. A series of sketches entitled "mother and child" by the nineteenth-century artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1890–1895; GLAHA:46158), in which young mothers gaze tenderly on babies, could offer a personal counterpoint to the sterile medical equipment currently on display. Less tender, but perhaps more personal, as it depicts a named woman and her son, is the broadside print entitled "Mrs. Everitt and her son the gigantic infant: born 7th Feby 1779" (1780; Rare Books Catalogue Record: b1720871). The size of the child in the image, large enough to garner tabloid attention, speaks directly to the necessity of the medical equipment on display in the obstetrics exhibition. The museum's archive or rare books collection could further furnish personal stories to explicate the medical equipment, such as the 1836 "Notes of the lives and death beds of Abner and David Brown," two infant brothers, "with suggestions on the Christian nurture of children" (Books Catalogue Record: b2062448), or an 1848 work "On the duration of labour as a cause of mortality and danger to the mother and infant" (Rare Books Catalogue Record: b1968535). The archaeology or world cultures collections, displayed in the main Hunterian Museum, but in different sections than the scientific equipment, could offer a global perspective on maternity and motherhood. A Malawian "medicine charm anklet" made for an infant (1905–1911; GLAHM:E.13/3) offers an alternative medical history to that currently on display.

An ancient Egyptian amulet (1600–1220 BCE; GLAHM:D.1929.99:) representing the mother symbolically in the form of a vulture (a species believed by Egyptians to be excellent mothers) was intended to offer protection to the wearer, speaking to the culture's belief in the mother as a figure of safety and security. A set of Asante gold weights from Ghana (1700–1900; GLAHM:E.1932.10/3) is decorated with symbols that represent conception, the mother, and the child. These everyday objects "are representative of cultural norms, standards, and ideals" (Griffith 2019: 64). Thus, the iconography again suggests the cultural importance of mothers.

Each of these objects—artwork, book, artifact—would introduce a cross-disciplinary approach to childbirth and maternity; each would supplement the dominant narrative of progress with new, alternative stories, centering women and children and offering a broader, global perspective. Achronological (the objects we have mentioned span from 1600 BCE to 1911 CE) and cross-disciplinary display of this kind has the potential to introduce new narrative structures into the museum that both complement and complicate sequential, progressive displays. We propose, therefore, that a narratological approach to exhibition design is one way of doing heritage "otherwise." This thinking somewhat mirrors the museological approach taken by Christopher Whitehead (2012: 30–34), although he writes exclusively of art museums and thinks of narrative in terms of sequence and arrangement rather than with explicit connection to textual forms. Steven D. Lavine and Ivan Karp were also thinking primarily of art displays when they influentially called for "experiments in exhibition design that try to present multiple perspectives or admit the highly contingent nature of the interpretations offered" (1991: 6). It is in the spirit of this discussion from within museum studies that we have been tempted to think about how other literary structures besides the *bildungsroman* might inform display design. What would be the effect, for instance, of introducing the medieval romance or the modernist novel into the museum? What new ways of thinking about objects (and time and history) might be revealed? We present the following narrative structures as provocations, inviting readers to consider what displays could look like structured along these lines, and how visitors might understand them.

Consider, for example, the medieval manuscript, with its richly decorated pages. As Janine Rogers and John Holmes argue, the illustrations in medieval manuscripts are "not merely decorative, but interpretively significant on the same level as the text itself" (Rogers and Holmes 2018: 7). Existing in the margins and borders of the page, medieval illustrations already represent points of intersection between different ways of constructing knowledge: between the visual and the textual, and between the artistic and scientific or theological. Rogers and Holmes note that marginal designs "could reinforce the meaning of primary text, or they could work against it. They were, in effect, margins that refused to remain marginal" (9). According to Rogers and Holmes, we can already see this structure at work in some museums, where the architectural and artistic flourishes of the building can be read as akin to marginal illustrations; they are designed to complement and comment on the scientific collections on display, as in the Natural History Museum,

London, and the Oxford University Museum of Natural History (Rogers and Holmes 2018). We might consider, then, how an individual exhibition would make use of marginalia. The imagined display at the Hunterian, described above, in which works of art could be employed to expand and complicate the story of the medical equipment, is one such example of the potential for exhibition "marginalia."

Or, what of the medieval romance? Rather than the progressive structure of most serial displays, which foregrounds causation and progress, what would a gallery look like premised on the repeating, episodic structure of romance? As Manuel Mühlbacher writes, "adventures are episodic units that pile up as a loose series of equivalent or even interchangeable events. Adventures tend to follow each other without necessarily presupposing each other; they are produced less by a plot-based chain of causation than by a certain kind of space, the major trait of which is to suddenly generate incalculable encounters" (Mühlbacher 2020: 112). An eclectic collection, we suggest, could be one such space that "generate[s] incalculable encounters" between apparently unalike objects. Imagine a series of very different objects to which it was possible to attach exactly the same label: "this would have been used in the evenings," "this tells us about the history of the ocean." What new insights might be generated by an attempt to homogenize the encounter between visitor and object in this way? We contend that such labeling—with objects placed near each other or distributed throughout the museum—could not only encourage new questions from visitors (what are the similarities between these objects?) but also cast the practice of labeling in a new light (how does the text frame the object?). For Mühlbacher, "the contingency inherent in adventure undercuts any attempt to proclaim a higher truth" (2020: 116). Could the structure of the episodic adventure, then, allow for greater polyvocality in the museum?

The romance as a compendium of connected but discrete incidents is echoed in the structure of late-Victorian general magazines such as the *Strand* (1891–1950), which intermixed a wide variety of material to appeal to the broadest possible audience. As Will Tattersdill has noted elsewhere, in these magazines "virtually anything could be over the next page, be it a report from a war artist, some photographs of cats, or the latest adventure from Arthur Conan Doyle" (Tattersdill 2016: 1). Like the medieval manuscript, the late-Victorian periodical is a site where the arts and sciences become entangled, not because of an editor's grand plan but simply by virtue of being part of the same physical object, the same reading experience. Distinct types of knowledge and inquiry are therefore brought together "through the harmonising vessel of the general magazine" (2016: 2). We usually talk of magazines as if they have a voice of their own, an identity slightly separate from that of any of the individuals involved; this is also how we tend to talk about institutions like museums. Such an identity is the result both of deliberate and accidental collisions between the disparate physical contents. Victorian magazines depended on miscellaneity for their commercial success—there was something for everyone in every issue—but the admixture of different material together in print created new possibilities for genre and storytelling. Can we imagine a gallery that adopts this miscellaneity deliberately? A display that juxtaposed some superficially dissimilar objects—say, the (now) white body of a Grecian statue and the bleached body of a previously colorful preserved tropical lizard—might have things to say about (for instance) anatomy, about the loss of color in our imaginary of the past or collecting as an act of colonial violence.

There are numerous forms of narrative that museums might draw on. We will leave you with one more to consider here: the literary Impressionism of the modernist novel. Rebecca Bowler defines this technique by the "double impression" that contains a "tension between an objective looking outwards and a subjective looking within" (Bowler 2016: 2). These novels, such as Dorothy Richardson's *Pointed Roofs* (1915) and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915), present to the reader both immediate and unfiltered perception and reflection upon those perceptions (Bowler 2016: 5). The first might be fragmentary or limited; the latter requires selecting and ordering. By depicting both, the modernist novel foregrounds for the reader the potential gaps in the former and the imposition of artificial structure in the latter, retaining the tensions and complexities that arise between the two. In depicting subjectivity in this way, these novelists remind readers that it is not "a given that we acquire our knowledge through the eye . . . Subjective visions cannot co-exist with the Cartesian model of seeing and knowing" (Bowler 2016: 4). A display that incorporated similar techniques would, by necessity, need to bring together many different voices and perspectives. Imagine a giddying wall of superficially dissimilar objects, such as the multistory display in the main gallery of the National Museum of Scotland, with a screen or sign color-coding the

many different "sub-displays" that could have been built out of them or with lines connecting the items by various aesthetic, thematic, or historical criteria.

We do not suggest that this idea, or any other in this section, represents an immediate or fully realized instance of the possibilities of eclectic display, and neither (per Whitehead 2012: xii–xiv) do we propose that narrative is the only factor in play in museum interpretation, but we hope we have demonstrated the potential of bringing literary form more deliberately into design decisions. Before continuing, it is worth tackling a couple of potential concerns about our provocations. Some may worry that when we suggest the applicability of the tools of literary criticism to the museum, we are reading galleries "as texts which are merely imprinted by 'big' social forces" (McCarthy 2020: 101): without reference to the role of the end-user or "reader" of the exhibition. It is true that the galleries in our provocations are empty, but this is because our focus here is on the value of narrative theory at the design stage of an exhibition, not because we imagine that curators are the sole meaning-makers and visitors mere passive recipients. Literary theory has a robust understanding of the role played by the reader in the formation of the text (see Attridge 2017); there is a literary–critical approach to the active and shaping role played in eclectic display by the visitor, but this we reserve for future discussion. The separate and less justifiable concern that may arise from the above is that we are somehow claiming that what is displayed in museums is fiction. In a period in which misinformation proliferates, the public relies on historical and scientific museums to present well-researched facts (American Alliance of Museums 2021). Yet, the tools of literary criticism can be used to analyze all kinds of non-fictional writing, including, as Stephen Greenblatt notes, "diaries and autobiographies, descriptions of clothing, reports on disease, birth and death records, [and] accounts of insanity" (1990: 18). As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle insist, "everything human that happens in the world is mediated by language," and the tools of literary criticism are applicable to all language, not simply texts or speech but "everything that works as a system of signs" (2004: 30) The museum is one such system.

Case Studies

We contend that eclectic displays of the kind described above will not only introduce new narratives into museums but also make collections more agile. Museums, we have already noted, are increasingly pressured to respond to current issues including decolonization and the climate crisis—yet traditional modes of display can be quite static, requiring years and enormous resources to reshape. Eclectic displays, on the other hand, can be worked up from existing collections comparatively simply. Note that doing so is a separate activity from (although it may share techniques and advantages with) the restaging of "original" cabinets of curiosity—what Stephen Bann (2003: 120) calls a "*ricorso*, or running back in time," where museums place (say) their Renaissance paintings alongside similarly aged natural history specimens in a manner evocative of the period. Eclecticism takes its cue from such historical precedents, but is not straightforwardly interested in "re-enactment." We suggest instead that it offers a form of un-disciplining that would allow museums easily to redeploy existing collections into more interactive, agile displays that can be readily adapted to new contexts, questions, and challenges.

This is the approach taken by the institution with which we opened this article, the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow. The Kelvingrove houses a very heterogeneous collection, including a Salvador Dalí masterpiece, a cast of a ceratosaur, a taxidermized giraffe, and a statue of Elvis Presley, among many, many other objects. Though the museum is divided into "Life" and "Expression," which largely separates natural history, human history, and prehistory from the arts, there are instances of eclectic display across the museum, as in the pairing of the elephant and the Spitfire described above (see also Kistler 2020). In what follows, we look at one instance where eclectic display has not been successful and another we argue represents the potential of the approach.

The Kelvingrove underwent a major redesign from 1998 to 2006, partly in response to the fact that "for [some visitors] its architecture and displays—still based on the original forms of disciplinary classification utilised to present the collections in 1901—made them feel judged and unwelcome" (MacLeod 2020: 171; see also Spooner 2014). The project team wanted a "museum where collections and stories [could] change over time" and so took a "modular approach—the designing in of low cost change—in what could otherwise

have been considered 'permanent' exhibitions" (MacLeod 2020: 173). This was a direct response to the "dominance of large-scale capital projects in museums which take so much resource and often remain unchanged for decades as a result" and the perceived need to tell stories across traditional disciplinary lines (MacLeod 2020: 176). The modular approach is enabled by the physical display units, designed by Mivan interiors to provide "virtually limitless options for the layout" and to be "easily configured by the museum staff" (Mivan n.d.). It was a system designed to allow for "small-scale, cost-effective and incremental change through the removal of some objects and stories and the addition of others" (MacLeod 2020: 176). The idea of small units that can be constantly rearranged into new and different stories is reflected in the museum's approach to narrative. Rather than a "grand or linking narrative," each gallery is designed around "six to eight small stories" that "together amounted to something more significant" (MacLeod 2020: 173, 176).

In practice, the museum has taken advantage of the modular system less than the above might suggest, with one fieldworker finding that already by 2013 the staff felt "that the museum was in a state of stasis" (Morgan 2013: 161). Many of the images MacLeod includes from the initial redesign in 2006 show displays identical to those in the museum at the time of our writing. Equally, some of its cross-disciplinary stories are more successful than others. One example is the *Animal Armoury* in the Conflict and Consequence gallery. Here, man-made weapons and armor are compared with animals' natural defensive and offensive adaptations, like the swordfish's bill or the crab's carapace. The presence of these animals shifts the tone of the gallery, as Toby Capwell, *Arms and Armour* curator, points out, reminding visitors that history of arms is not just about "wars and killing, but it's also about art history, science, social history and economics" (*The Herald* 2006). This makes for a visually compelling display, popular with children. However, the juxtaposition of these objects serves to suggest that man-made swords are the same as the swordfish's bill, which it uses to hunt prey. As the curatorial team writes, "this shows the similarities between human and evolutionary solutions to the problems of defending yourself and attacking others. Visitors are often amazed by how alike these are" (Rutherford et al. 2007). However, this emphasis on similarity risks equating human wars with the swordfish's need to hunt to survive, naturalizing human violence. Capwell is aware of this, acknowledging that "[i]t's important to be mindful of the violence, which is implicit in the material" (*The Herald* 2006). Yet, this does not necessarily come across in the display, which comically includes a taxidermized chicken (with a crest on its head similar to the design of some medieval helmets) and movie props (a helmet from the children's fantasy film *Willow*, 1988). The whimsy of these objects risks obscuring the "implicit" violence of human-made weaponry, which is so often predicated on nationality, race, or religion, not a biological drive to survive.

In 2023, on the other hand, the Kelvingrove opened a new exhibition entitled *Glasgow: City of Empire*. This exhibition brings together a wide variety of objects from across the museum to "better address the histories and legacies of transatlantic slavery and British colonialism."[3] The objects on display span natural history, literature, social history, and fine art, and include: a taxidermized bird from a Dutch plantation in Suriname; a Scottish painting from 1818 depicting the launch of a sailing vessel; imperial propogandist literature such as the 1908 volume *Heroes of Our Empire*; day-to-day objects of empire, including a teapot and a chocolate tin; and contemporary art including a work by the sculptors Ramu and Shubho Karmakar. This exhibition is an example of how an eclectic collection, combined with the museum's modular design, did indeed allow for a relatively quick and presumably cost-effective redeployment of existing objects to tell a new story. Displayed within a traditional natural history collection, the stuffed purple-breasted cotinga of Suriname would tell a very different story than it does here, where it illustrates the role of scientific exploration and collection in empire and the specific story of Robert Kirke of Fife, who was one of the last slave owners in Scotland, continuing to enslave people on his plantation in Suriname until the Netherlands abolished slavery in 1873. The bird now tells a social history in addition to a natural one. The juxtaposition of a "door made for the Indian Pavilion of the Glasgow International Exhibition of Industry, Science and Art, 1888" with the sculpture by the Karmakars (2013) makes a striking point about how we value artistry and artisans, the named contemporary Indian artists contrasted with the unnamed nineteenth-century Indian artisans who produced the intricately carved door (the label points out that "this door is symbolic of imperial exploitation . . . the expert craftsmen from Bhera Shahpur are unknown and unacknowledged").[4]

Rather than a chronological or taxonomic display, the *City of Empire* exhibition parallels the magazine model discussed above. A wide range of objects either produced in, collected in, or referencing the height of empire in the nineteenth century have been brought together giving a panoramic view of Glasgow's

relationship to empire. As the wall signage acknowledges, this exhibition "is not a complete or perfect" response to calls to decolonize museum collections, but it represents an important early stage of confronting the legacies of the collection and reinterpreting it to uncover the stories hidden within, and it was made possible through the Kelvingrove's eclectic collection and openness to cross-disciplinary display.[5] Taken together with the relative failure of the *Animal Armoury*, the case study suggests that eclectic display is most effective when conducted with critical juxtaposition in mind.

While the Kelvingrove contains moments of eclectic display, many of its displays follow traditional models, as in the French Art Gallery, which is arranged in the traditional art historic manner: the gallery, which displays canvases in the standard single line, focuses only on nineteenth-century French Impressionism. A rare example of a museum that imbues all its displays with eclecticism, on the other hand, is the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature à Paris, the Museum of Hunting and Nature in Paris. The name of the museum suggests that it will contain a very focused collection of hunting equipment and the preserved bodies of the animals hunted, and this is certainly true—but the objects are presented in such a way that the implicit anthropocentrism and extractivism often found at the heart of sport hunting is interrupted. Reopened after renovations in 2007 and again in 2021, the museum draws on a wide range of material—taxidermized animals, mounted hunting trophies, weapons, sculpture, painting, mix-media installations, domestic goods, and domestic furnishing—to explicate "the relationship between man and animal" (Westphalen and Bromberg 2015: 8). The museum is designed as the "imaginary residence of a hunter and collector" and thus, in addition to incorporating scientific and artistic material, it playfully references the genre of the house museum (2015: 9).

The expected objects of a hunting museum are most prominent in the Trophy Gallery, which is dominated by rifles and mounted heads of a variety of big game. The display strategies here are very traditional; mounted heads line the upper portion of the room, while the lower is given over to wall cases full of rifles. However, artistic installations accompany and challenge the traditional material. For instance, an animatronic boar's head is mounted among the real taxidermized animal heads. When activated, the boar grunts menacingly and appears to "attempt to extract itself from the wall" (Musée de la Chasse n.d.). The museum catalog notes that, on a "symbolic level, [taxidermy's] transformation of a living being into an inanimate object may be seen as an act of appropriation, with the trophy affirming man's domination over nature" (Westphalen and Bromberg 2015: 93). The automaton, made by artist Nicolas Darrot, reverses this transformation, as an apparently inanimate object "comes to life" to challenge the status of hunting trophies and to confront the visitor who admires them. In a cabinet nearby, a series of small, white figures of animals, including an elephant, a giraffe, and a monkey, appear strikingly similar to a child's toy set; however, each is blasted through with a bullet hole nearly as big as the figure itself. The white surfaces of the sculptures erase the features and individuality of the animals, so they become nothing but the victims of the bullets that mar their surfaces. Each artwork in the room functions like the medieval manuscripts' marginalia; creating a point of contact between the arts and the natural sciences, they interrogate the meaning of the "primary text" of the room (the trophies) and offer an alternative way of understanding humanity's drive to collect and display exotic animals.

Another room evokes the imagined study of the British naturalist Charles Darwin. Here, eclecticism is to the fore: stuffed animals, animal skulls, study models of flowers, statues, tableware, canned goods, and scientific texts fill the shelves of the naturalist's cabinet; a fanciful sculpture of a crocodile in gold hangs overhead. The room evokes a "cabinet of curiosities," a much older model of display than that practiced in the mid-nineteenth century when Darwin developed his theories of natural and sexual selection. Crucially, the display makes no attempt to depict Darwin's actual working environment (which is managed as a house museum by English Heritage at Down House in Kent). Rather, eclecticism is deployed to make a broader point about the scientific process. The explanatory card (tucked away in a drawer rather than prominently displayed, the labels encourage visitors to engage with the objects first) notes that in the room:

> a certain ambiguity reigns as to the classification logic adopted: sometimes surprising associations, shifts and hybridisations destabilise the expected order. This imagined office of Charles Darwin (1809–1882) is testament to scientific thinking in the making, where studied specimens rub shoulders with domestic objects, far from the fixed classifications of systematic zoology that we admire in the showcases of natural history museums.[6]

The card notes that Darwin's insights come both from the field, in his journey on HMS *Beagle*, and long introspection in his home; natural specimens thus intermingle with domestic goods in the display. For example, botanical wallpaper speaks both to the norms of Victorian interior décor and the central role of botany in Darwin's work. The room makes clear the point—one understood well by Darwin himself (Beer 2009)—that "science" does not happen in a silo, conducted only in sterile labs or in the field. Nor is science conducted for itself only, or only in the pursuit of "truth." An art installation of canned goods, each labeled with the name of an exotic animal—tigre, zèbre, crocodile, guèpard—speaks to the close relationship between science, empire, and commercial industries. As Paul Young demonstrates, tinned meat was a Victorian innovation that allowed the average British consumer to eat animals from all around the globe (Young 2019). Like the Victorian adventure fiction that Young writes about, these cans "bear traces of [empire's] rapacious, violent, and pervasive planetary effects" (2019: 180).

Throughout the museum, both historical art collections—the Musée holds a significant number of artworks, including several works of Peter Paul Rubens—and contemporary painting, sculpture, and installation sit alongside (and at times incorporate) the natural, offering an idiosyncratic and challenging look at a millennia-long story of the entangled relationship of humanity and the natural world. It tells a story of hunting, but also conservation and increasing ecological crisis. Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel argue that "it can be assumed that a museum will have a more diverse public, the greater the diversity of the works it exhibits" (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991: 86). The Kelvingrove's *City of Empire* expressly frames itself as the first step in a wider reinterpretation of the collections to speak to "diverse audiences."[7] Equally, as demonstrated by numerous reviews posted online, the Musée de la Chasse attracts audiences who would not otherwise seek out a museum of hunting. Eclecticism, we contend, is an important tool for widening participation in the museum sector.

Conclusion

For many visitors, the experience of a museum is already eclectic. Depending on the institution, their visit is more or less likely to take them between many different displays fashioned by different hands at different times. Consider today's visitor to London's Natural History Museum, who might take in the brand new (July 2024) wildlife gardens before walking through the Victorian (1881) architecture of the Hintze Hall (redeveloped as an index collection in 2017), past the crowded dinosaur gallery (largely 1991), to the cocoon of the Darwin Centre, an interactive gallery with a boldness characteristic of its 2000s design. In doing so, they will see not only many different kinds of objects but many different narrative techniques, all putatively joined in the museum's mission to make such a journey equivalent to traveling "through 4.6 billion years of our planet's history."[8] Like the reader of a nineteenth-century magazine, they might miss any one of these locations or encounter them in different orders; like the reader of a modernist novel, they might look immediately for coherence between all of this difference or come to it only upon reflection. What we wish to emphasize here is that eclecticism and narrative form are already present in nearly every museum, yet very few institutions capitalize on the possibilities that eclecticism generates of doing heritage "otherwise."

There are at least three potential gains to be had in treating eclecticism as a virtue, as we have attempted to demonstrate from our position as literary critics. First, eclectic displays offer a means of introducing narratives (or narrative techniques) that can tell new stories or complicate old ones using objects already in the museum's collection. Second, eclectic displays offer a new way of valuing the kinds of collections that receive less attention in national conversations or funding decisions—collections that exist perhaps primarily in small, regional museums with important stories to tell and fewer resources with which to tell them. Finally, we suggest that eclectic displays have the potential to be more dynamic than either high-profile temporary exhibitions or "permanent" long-term galleries, allowing museums to respond to the changing needs of the sector in a quick and cost-effective manner.

The received account of museum history tends to denigrate the eclectic collection, in spite of the scholarly, narrative, educational, and aesthetic potential that has always arisen from the juxtaposition of superficially dissimilar things. The current situation of the UK's museum sector makes this an excellent

moment both to revalue the potential of such collections and to consider how positively they might be used to narrate the displays of the future. In addition to this, though, we want to close by reasserting the interdisciplinary benefits of eclectic collections, whose objects often demonstrate the capacity to carry their viewers across the boundaries that have traditionally divided kinds of knowledge. The virtues of eclectic displays lie not only in the connections they can forge in visitors' minds but in the connections they can re-establish between schools of knowledge that have drifted apart. They have drifted apart because of specialization, and specialization has had its advantages. But a different paradigm—old in some ways, new in others—is available in the eclectic collection. It is increasingly clear that the human and natural worlds pose questions single disciplines cannot answer alone. A juxtaposition that preserves difference can therefore be as useful in research as in display, easing the way to exchanges of knowledge and reframing old questions with the benefit of fresh perspectives. Eclectic collections inherently resist myopic narratives that insist on a single explanation, framework, or solution, and such resistance is a very healthy basis for collaboration (see McCarty 2016). For example, the Musée de la Chasse addresses conservation and the climate crisis from a number of disciplinary backgrounds: social history (of humanity's relationship with nature), the history of science, ecology, literary studies (animal myths and legends feature prominently), and the arts, with the latter two especially deployed to explore imagined futures, both of loss and of new possible relations between humanity and the natural world. To us, the potential advantages of assembling such a range of disciplinary perspectives lies precisely in the fact that not all the outcomes are foreseeable. What are the possibilities of bringing a similarly mixed group into, and out of, a collection you know well? In this article, we hope to have made you curious about the answer to this question.

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NOTES

1. Our definition therefore does not include specialized institutions, even those that adopt some aspects of eclectic display, such as the achronicity adopted by The Burrell Collection, Glasgow. The Burrell groups objects by a number of non-period and non-national categories, including color and theme, but it is still exclusively an art collection. However, we suggest the novel approaches to display represented by the Burrell (reopened in 2022), the Young V&A (reopened in 2023), and the Science Museum's Mathematics Gallery (opened 2016), among others, demonstrate a turn in the sector to resisting traditional periodization and categorization.
2. Wall signs in the "From the Beginning" gallery in the Earth Hall, Natural History Museum, London (visited 13 July 2024).
3. Wall sign in the *Glasgow: City of Empire* exhibition, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (visited 7 May 2024).
4. Label on "Door made for the Indian Pavilion of the Glasgow International Exhibition of Industry, Science and Art, 1888" in the *Glasgow: City of Empire* exhibition, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (visited 7 May 2024).
5. Wall sign in the *Glasgow: City of Empire* exhibition, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (visited 7 May 2024).
6. Explanatory card, "The Scientist at Work," Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature (visited 14 February 2024).

7. Wall sign in the *Glasgow: City of Empire* exhibition, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (visited 7 May 2024).
8. Natural History Museum. n.d. Homepage. https://www.nhm.ac.uk/ (accessed 9 September 2024).

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