Conversing with Spirits: The British Museum Columbarium

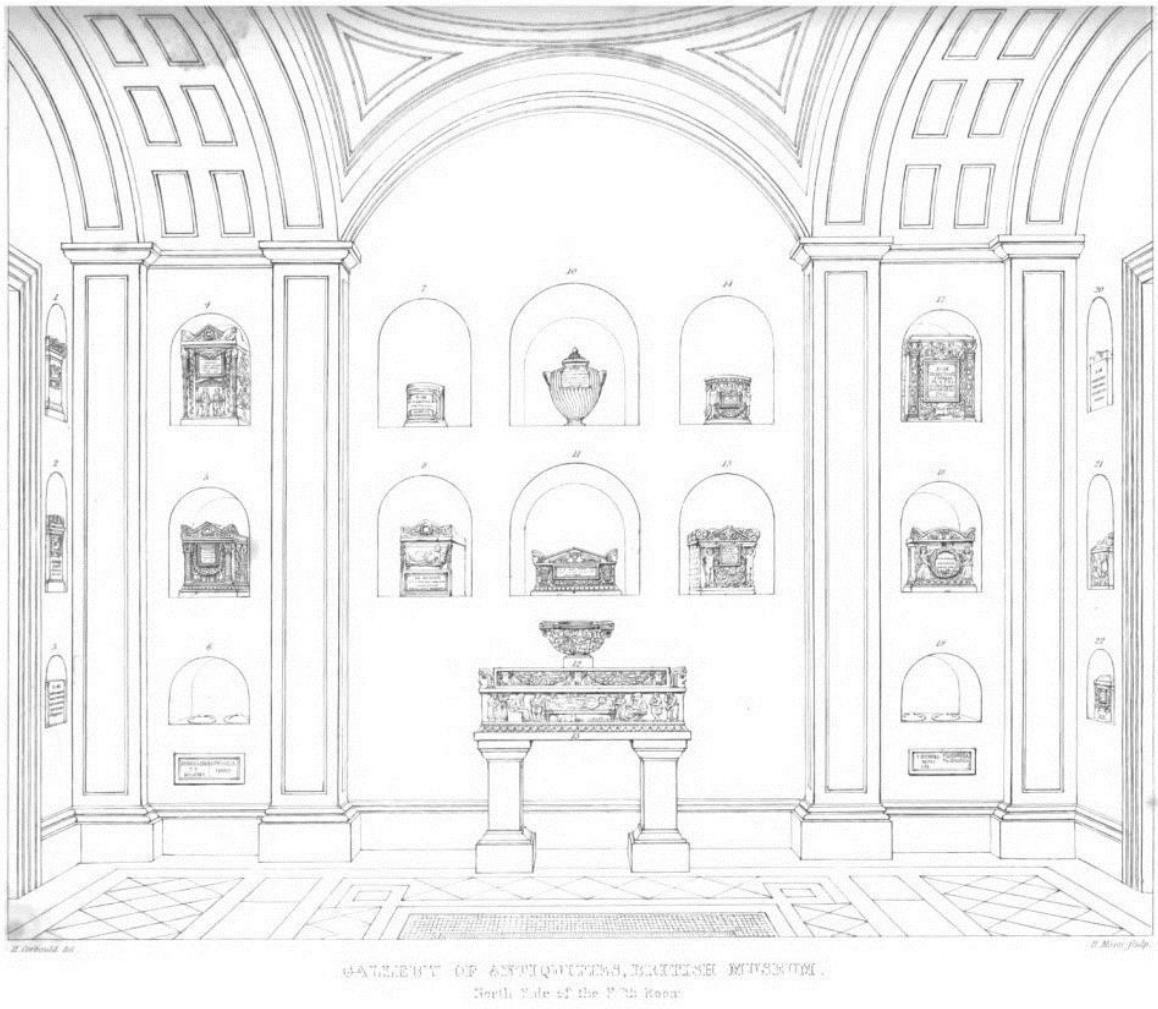

Fig.1. 'Townley Gallery, Room V'. From *Description of Ancient Marbles in the British Museum*, vol V (1826). Photograph: Hathi Trust [Available at: https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008693035] (Digitised by the New York Public Library)

In 1808 a new gallery extension to the British Museum was unveiled to the British public by Queen Charlotte, the Prince of Wales and the Dukes of Cumberland and Cambridge. The new wing, named the Townley Gallery, housed the museums growing collection of antiquities from the ancient world including the vase collection of Sir William Hamilton, the Egyptian marbles acquired after Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Alexandria, as well as the collection of over three hundred ancient marble sculptures, reliefs, inscriptions and cineraria from the respected British collector Charles Townley, from which the space gained its name. My current research in preparation for my monograph, *Conversing with Ancients: Collecting and Curating Classical Art in Britain, 1755-1930*, explores the display and reception of ancient art in the Townley Gallery and how we can understand the creation of the modern British Museum. Drawing from this research, in this blog post I wanted to introduce one room of the Townley Gallery, to introduce a new way of interpreting this space as a museum display in the early nineteenth century and how we understand antiquities within heritage institutions.

The Townley Gallery was connected to Montagu House through two corridors which flanked an open courtyard. The first contained the display of the Campana reliefs, a series of ancient terracotta relief tiles dating to the 1st century BC. The second was fitted out in the style of an ancient columbarium, a type of tomb structure popular for the display and preservation of ancient cinerary vessels in the ancient world. Columbaria were often built either partially or completely underground and often contained rich decoration and housed the elaborate and decorative urns and chests which contained the ashes of the deceased.[1] The fifth volume of the museum's publication Description of Ancient Marbles in the British Museum described the space as 'fitted up in the form of a Columbarium, to shew [sic] the mode in which Romans deposited the Urns containing the ashes of their deceased friends and dependants'.[2]

Entered via a low lintel and lit from above, the Columbarium display would have been a striking departure from the environment of Montagu House. The main building, which in addition to being the former private residence, displayed objects within display cases and cabinets. This drew from the tradition of the gentlemanly Cabinet of Curiosity or Wunderkammer, complete with elaborate seventeenth century interiors.[3] In comparison the Townley Gallery, which was coloured a muted green colour, imitating green granite, and presented antiquities as singular objects for contemplation. The Columbarium, the only space in the museum to attempt any kind of historical recreation or display, had the effect of transporting the visitor from the land of the living (Montagu House and Cabinet style collection) to that of the dead (the Townley Gallery and the remains of the ancient world). The room displayed the sepulchral antiquities not as singular objects, but rather in a romanticised view, as if still in use. In displaying the remains of antiquity in the guise of a tomb it is as if the visitor must first pay their respects to the dead, or to pass through the underworld, to the domain of the ancients.

The Columbarium, as a transitional space between galleries, creates an effect of a tunnel through time, in which, through a contemplation of the ancients, time and space between antiquity and the present are collapsed and placed in dialogue with one another. Its sets apart the display of antiquity and the display of the cabinet as being separate spaces for different kinds of contemplation and reception. In her 1995 work, Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums, Carol Duncan illustrated how museums, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were spaces removed from time, in which objects and artworks are presented as if in stasis.[4] I have only begun to explore the theories behind the idea of the Columbarium as a space outside of temporality, of the dialogue between objects and space and how these relate to the display and reception of antiquities in the early nineteenth century. The Townley Gallery illuminates the impact of space and environment within

[1] J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 48.
[2] *Description of Ancient Marbles in the British Museum*, vol V (London: W. Nichol for the British Museum, 1826).
[3] M. Caygill, 'From Private Collection to Public Museum: The Sloane Collection at Chelsea and the British Museum in Montagu House' in R. G. W. Anderson, M. L Cayfill, A. G. MacGregor & L. Syson (eds), *Enlightening the British: Knowledge, Discovery and the Museum in the Eighteenth Century* (London: British Museum Press, 2004), p.22.
[4] Carol Duncan, *Civilising Rituals: Inside the Public Art Gallery* (Routledge: London & New York, 1995).

heritage institutions can create interesting dialogues between past and present and between object and viewer.

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