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## Private and Public: The Cuming Collection

Mary Addyman

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a “modern” museum. Rather, in the tradition of other museums with origins in private houses, such as those of John Tradescant and Sir Hans Sloane, it developed in a more organic manner. In spite of the inevitable limitations of this counter model, Cole’s article, which offers a detailed account of the most important features of Soane’s collection, affirms its continued importance, and aims to prevent it being eclipsed by the new. Clearly the expectations of the public had acquired an urgency that was entirely in keeping with museological developments at other institutions—yet the eccentricities of the Soane, at the very least, help us to take their measure.

#### Notes

- 1 A copy of the act (dated 20 April 1833) was appended by Soane to the 1835 edition of his *Description*, 101–09. See pp. 101–02.
- 2 For an elaboration of that argument, see Thomas.

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MARY ADDYMAN

**I**N 1902, the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* published the obituary of the collector and antiquarian Henry Syer Cuming. Cuming, born in 1817 in Walworth, South London, had been an active member of the BAA since it was formed in 1843 and was well known within the organization.

The tribute to him details how he “inherited” the collecting habit “in a strong degree” from his father Richard (1777–1870) and how this passion continued unabated throughout his life (“Henry Syer Cuming” 239). Cuming’s home is described as “a private museum, where he stored the choicest specimens . . . carefully arranged, classified, and exhaustively labelled, thus forming a thoroughly educational series to the student of bygone times” (240). The Cuming collection, the obituary claims, was an aid to scholarship, providing the material basis of the nearly two hundred articles that Henry had published in the JBAA over the previous fifty-eight years. Cuming, we learn, “freely imparted information and the kindest assistance” to those who sought his expertise (240), ensuring that the collection was of benefit to the whole community of antiquarians of which he formed a part, and its continued usefulness was assured when, upon his death, he bequeathed the entire collection to the local authority, with the instruction in his will that it was to be exhibited in “a suitable and spacious Gallery or apartments . . . in connection with Newington Public Library.” He also provided a sum for the salary of a keeper. With relief, the JBAA noted that “the collection he had formed will not be dispersed” (240).

Throughout the nineteenth century, museum modes of classification and display were held up as the gold standard to which collectors ought to aspire.<sup>1</sup> Cuming’s obituary illustrates how private collections were celebrated for the good ordering and assiduous documentation that could potentially make them, like museums, useful, accessible sources of knowledge about the world. If “the idea of the museum has become fundamental to collecting practices beyond the museum” (Macdonald 81), then it was in the Victorian period that this association developed, as domestic collectors were encouraged to ape museum standards. John Charles Robinson, a leading figure at the South Kensington Museum, wrote in 1857 that “the establishment of public museums . . . render[s] the taste for collecting almost universal amongst educated persons” (iv–v), and this causal link has remained established in scholarship to the present day; it has recently been claimed that Victorians collected “in homage to museums” (Black 4). But the relationship between public museums and private collections in the nineteenth century was more complex than that of exemplar and imitator. The institutional history of the Cuming collection suggests that the interests of the expanding public, state-funded museums were not always aligned with the passions of private collectors.

The Cuming Museum opened to the public in 1906 and the borough librarian was appointed curator. Its displays changed little over the next forty years. The museum employed what had, in this period, become customary modes of museum display; cabinets, into which numerous objects were set out for visual apprehension, lined and divided the room. Glass cases were filled with displays that grouped together objects from the family’s eclectic collection. The specially-built galleries, appropriately named

“The Works of Nature” and “The Works of Man,” were arranged to illustrate the progress and development of both natural and artificial objects: shoes, hats, weapons, and tools on one side, and specimens of natural history and taxidermy on the other. They suggested connections—lines of development and inheritance—and highlighted both differences and similarities. The Cumings’ objects, thus set out, were lessons. But the methodical, rational objectivity that the displays retroactively conferred on the Cumings’ collecting practices begins to crumble when we probe the discontinuity between the collection’s public incarnation and its earlier life at home.

Totalling over 25,000 items by the time of Henry’s death, the private collection had been housed at the family home in Walworth.<sup>2</sup> Five-year-old Richard Cuming had been given a coin and some fossils in 1782 and had started to collect curiosities that appealed to him. Henry had avidly continued his father’s acquisitive activities, and, over a century, the collection grew. Richard’s interests had lain with geological and natural history specimens, as well as ethnographic items from the Pacific Islands. Henry’s additions to the collection consisted mainly of items relating to the archaeological and architectural history of the British Isles.

The Cuming family home, 63 Kennington Park Road, was dominated by the collection. Photographs from the 1860s show that it did not simply mimic museum display motifs (figs. 1 and 2). Richard Cuming is pictured seated among statuary and ceramics. Objects cover every surface and line the walls. Behind Henry, a large ammonite looms into view. One can only imagine what it must have been to move about a house furnished so profusely, to share one’s space with a collection quite so intimately. An inventory of the house and collection, drawn up by solicitors Champion and Busby, in October 1902, after Henry’s death, offers a more detailed view of the scale and eclecticism of the collection, although its clinical, decontextualized descriptions render some items rather startling; the contents of the breakfast room are given as “Paintings, plaster casts of animals. Bookcase, books, Doulton ware. Man trap” (Champion and Busby n.p.). Among attempts at logical display, there are clues that the Cumings were becoming overwhelmed by the colossal volume of the collections: sixty-two drawers of named coins give way to seventeen drawers of unnamed; general “curios” spill from drawers and cupboards and out onto open surfaces; three pedestal desks on the landing are piled with pamphlets and papers listed as “almanacks, Kew Gardens, Portraits, Trade adverts, Antiquities, Archaeology, Biographies . . . Vegetable anatomy, Surrey, juvenalia, Cuming MS, personal ornament, hunting and fishing, house signs, advertisements, heraldry” (Champion and Busby n.p.) Several unsorted boxes of miscellaneous ephemera are extant in the museum’s archive today. The Cumings did attempt to compile a catalogue of their collection, but the jumbled, loose-leaf, unfinished manuscript accounts for only a tiny proportion of



FIG. 1: Portrait photograph of Richard Cuming at 63 Kennington Park Road (186?). Courtesy of Cuming Museum, London Borough of Southwark.



FIG. 2: Portrait photograph of Henry Syer Cuming at 63 Kennington Park Road (186?). Courtesy of Cuming Museum, London Borough of Southwark.

the total material accumulated. The abundance and diversity of the material world appears to have resisted their systemization.

Other aspects of the collectors' material lives are changed or muted by the collection's later incarnation as a public space. Henry Cuming and his sweet-heart exchanged botanical specimens as sentimental tokens; he kept the brass number from the front door of his childhood home; he labelled a human skull to record that it was the last specimen his father ever handled, less than sixty hours before his death.<sup>3</sup> He collected a fragment of glass to commemorate the hailstorm that destroyed a window of his home, and a tooth (the lower-left cuspid) from the body of Don Afonso VI, King of Portugal. He called these items "memorials of events" (Cuming "Catalogue" n.p.):<sup>4</sup> not merely material for scholarly analysis but carriers of personal meaning. Such objects, coded as secular relics, had no place in Victorian pedagogical museums. They were, to use Teresa Barnett's terms, "the shadowy antimatter of the solidly informational historical artifact" (2–3). Many are now lost.

Having been bequeathed the Cuming collection in 1902, the Metropolitan Borough of Southwark asked Charles Hercules Read, president of the Society of Antiquaries and Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography at the British Museum, to assess it. Read was unimpressed. He wrote that "the examination of the collection was disappointing to me, as so very small a proportion of it is of intrinsic interest and so few of the individual specimens of high quality" (qtd. in Humphrey 14). Initially the borough council considered storing the collection away and having a small selection of items on display in an entrance hall, but eventually new accommodation was built at the back of Newington Library in 1905. In 1941, the museum was hit by an incendiary bomb, whereupon it closed for eighteen years, reopening in 1959 with a focus on local history. Injudicious and undocumented lending in the intervening years meant that many objects were loaned from the collection, never to be seen again (Hyacinth 138). In March 2013, a devastating fire tore through the Newington Library and Cuming Museum. Many of the objects on display were rescued, but the museum has been closed to the public ever since. In August 2015, Southwark borough council made most of its Museums and Heritage workforce redundant, in a restructuring and review of services.

Walter Benjamin writes that "even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter" (68). The Cuming collection's dearth of "intrinsically" interesting objects was overcome, in its museum incarnation, by display techniques that used the collection narratively; museum reformer Thomas Greenwood wrote in 1888 that "the usefulness of a Museum . . . does not depend entirely so much on the number or intrinsic value of its treasures as on the proper arrangement, classification, and naming of the various specimens in so clear a way that the uninitiated

may grasp quickly the purpose and meaning of each particular specimen” (8). Even poor quality museum specimens, then, could be arranged to tell a meaningful story. But private collections were not bound by any imperative to be useful and so could glory in disorder and taxonomic chaos. For the collectors, there were no material deficiencies to obscure through careful display. Every shabby or mundane object warranted individual attention. Henry’s antiquarian writings reflect this: he writes in meticulous, scholarly detail about spectacles, pot-hooks, purses, and keys, and engages imaginatively with them, too, speculating on their previous owners or the circumstances of their use. The things in his collection, Henry wrote, although “few in number and mere trifles in the eyes of most people . . . are dear to me” (“Letter”). They constituted points of connection between his own self and the public narrative called history. As collected objects turn into museum objects and become constituents of that public narrative, this poignancy retreats.

Considering the institutional history of the Cuming collection suggests the need to complicate our understanding of the imitative relationship between Victorian state museums and private, domestic collectors. The Cumings clearly aspired, to some degree, to emulate and participate in museum culture, as Henry’s bequest of the collection attests. But through their collecting, they also lived among, and formed connections with, things in ways that surpassed museums’ aim of useful education. These Victorians variously celebrated and rejected museum directives in relation to value, use, and display. Collections provided opportunities for engagement with objects in ways that were unattainable in museum settings. They are fruitful sites for the study of affective subject-object encounters that challenge our understandings of the Victorian ordering of the world of things. Attending to this disorder and diversity in collectors’ material practices may help us to better appreciate and manage their legacies today.

#### Notes

- 1 This is made particularly apparent in collecting handbooks for children; an 1888 guide for would-be child collectors of heraldry, coins, and postage stamps chides and encourages young readers with the promise that “if you only take pains and pride yourself on being accurate in your information, you may easily make a collection which will only be inferior in size, and not at all in quality, to Fairbairn’s collection of crests in Kensington Museum” (Montresor 75).
- 2 “A Private Exhibition of Jubilee Mementoes” describes an 1887 exhibition at the Cuming household that respectable people might visit. Bryn Hyacinth also notes that an incomplete manuscript catalogue compiled by the Cumings makes reference to a visitor book, although none has ever been found (130).
- 3 Manuscript letters between Henry and Rosaline can be found in Southwark Local History Library, London, Box A270/4. The doorplate and skull are items Co9743 and Co4819 in the Cuming Museum holdings.
- 4 These items are listed in the manuscript catalogue, where this moniker comes from, but can no longer be identified in the museum collections.

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## The Pantheon on the Mantelpiece

TOM MOLE

FROM THE agitation that preceded the Reform Bill of 1832 to the repercussions that followed that of 1885, Great Britain was engaged in an especially intense period of reflection on who constituted the nation and what they shared. Creating a shared identity in the present meant constructing a shared past, which often took the form of a pantheon of great men (and very few women). The founding of the National Gallery (1824), National Portrait Gallery (1856), Scottish National Gallery (1859), and Scottish National Portrait Gallery (1889) created prominent places to display images of notable individuals; from the 1790s on, "plans for national pantheonic structures were rife" (Yarrington 107). Pantheons could be discursive, like Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age* (1825), or sculptural, such as those in Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral. Or they could be popular, such as the waxworks in Madame Tussaud's collection (which the *Edinburgh Review* ironically described as "that British Valhalla" ["Mr. Disraeli" 421]) and the busts that decorated the "pantheon" assembly rooms in Oxford Street (1772–1814). Drawing up lists of the individuals who counted from the past helped produce a consensus about the nation's shared heritage, during a period of intense uncertainty