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The Victoria and Albert Museum: Rethinking the Context

BRUCE ROBERTSON

IT IS useful to remember that the Victoria and Albert Museum did not receive its current name until 1899; before then it was the South Kensington Museum (or Museums). When it opened, it was effectively a condensation of the Great Exhibition's compendium of Art and Industry: the collection included the Museum of Ornamental Art and the Sheepshanks Gallery but also the Patent Museum, the Museum of Animal Products, the Food Collection, the Museum of Construction, the Educational Museum, the Economic Museum, and a few other odds and ends; a few years later, ship models, paintings and oils by J. M. W. Turner, and an active fish hatchery were added. The purpose of this collection of collections was to educate, with two audiences in mind: the general public and students in the schools affiliated with the museum, beginning with the School of Design. The museum was a classroom, not only for those formally enrolled in courses but also for self-education. The museum was also effectively a workshop and laboratory (where different design and building techniques could be developed), as well as a gift shop and the first museum café. By 1899, the museum had largely become a museum of decorative arts but still retained elements of its heterogenous past at its Bethnal Green outpost (fig. 1).

It is also useful to know that the person responsible for the name change from South Kensington to Victoria and Albert was Lyon Playfair, a member of Prince Albert's circle from 1850 and the museum's cofounder, with Henry Cole, as one of the two secretaries of the Science and Art Department, the institution that housed the museum and its affiliated schools.

In histories of the V&A, Playfair's name is seldom mentioned; his departure from the department in 1858, one year after the museum opened its doors in South Kensington, has been taken to indicate that his tenure was a

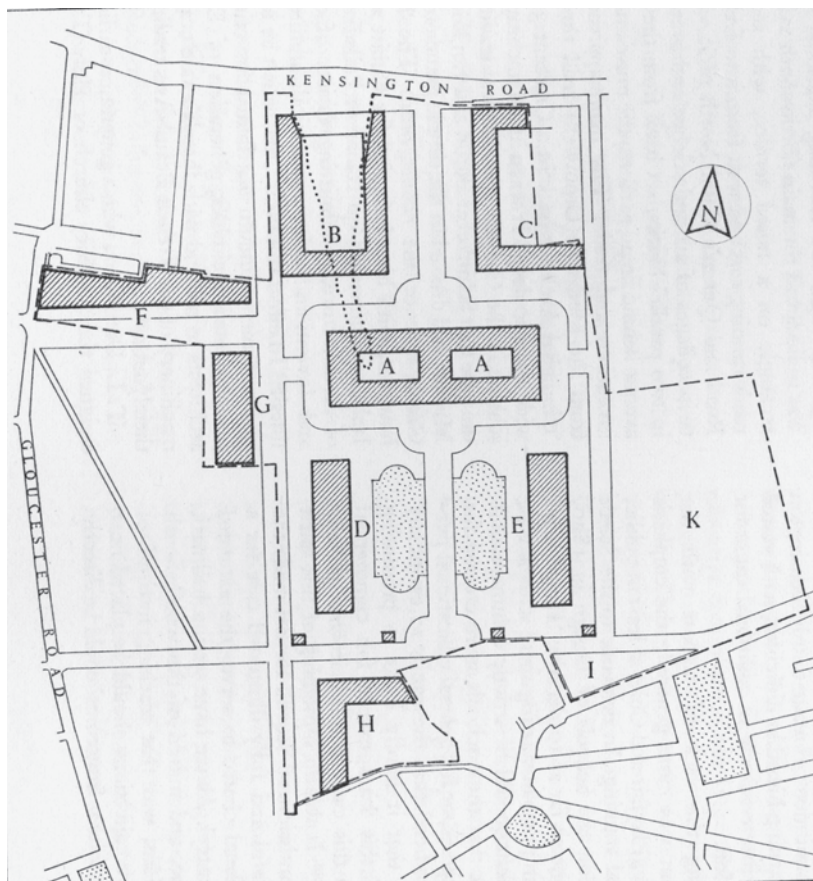


FIG. 1: Sketch-layout of the 1851 Commissioners' Estate suggested by Prince Albert in 1853. A, National Gallery; B, C, Colleges of Art and Science; D, E, Museums of Industrial Art, Patented Inventions, Trade Museums, etc.; F, G, H, private houses, official residences, or other institutions; I, possible site of hall for Academy of Music; K, possible site of Learned Societies; L, Hall of Glory; K, Approximate site of the current V&A.

From *Survey of London*, vol. 38, *The Museums Area of South Kensington and Westminster* (1975).

failure.¹ In fact, as one of the commissioners of the exhibition of 1851, and as the long-time representative of the Scottish universities to Parliament, among his many other governmental and royal duties, he remained vitally interested in the functions of the museum and its success; in 1885, the museum reported directly to him, as vice-president of the Privy Council. But the erasure of Playfair's role is indicative of a larger amnesia, one that discounts the fundamental fact that the museum was conceived as a function of the Science and Art Department and given the task of putting into

concrete action the department's goals to improve and spread technical education throughout Britain. The V&A was primarily an institution for the production and transmission of knowledge across the disciplines. This purpose was shared by the first civic museums in the United States, almost all of them created in alliance with schools: New York's Metropolitan Museum had a school; Boston's and Chicago's still do.

The goal of technical education is a prism through which the creation and programs of museums in Victorian Britain, and then throughout the colonies and much of the Western world, needs to be seen. Museums were emphatically conceived of as part of the great reform of education that was set in train in Britain with the election of the Reform Parliament in 1830, an approach mirrored by similar developments throughout Europe and the United States. In Britain, the Museum Act of 1845, followed by legislation in 1850 and 1855, created public libraries and parks in addition to museums. The Science and Art Department, created in 1853 under the Board of Trade, administered the development of the collections and museums that would find their home in South Kensington in the late 1850s. In other words, museums, even art museums, were always part of a larger system of education, industry, and improvement; they were not created as the autonomous, transcendent spaces imagined by the avant-garde or modern art history.

Modernism, and particularly the postmodernist criticism that developed after the mid-1960s, have tended to read museums back from the present moment, as though the invention of the public museum had as its apex or end point the Guggenheim Bilbao or Tate Modern. The critique of avant-gardes—that museums are not the revolutionary, anti-bourgeois institutions they should be—has little purchase on the actualities of public museums and the intentions of their founders in the middle of the nineteenth century. In particular, the absolute distinction between art and science, as two separate realms of thought and method, has little to do with the understanding of these two terms in the early nineteenth century, when they still retained a good deal of their original sense of the distinction between craft and theory, of something learned by hands-on experience and something learned through texts or experimentation.

Looking back at the origins of these ideas, we find ourselves in Francis Bacon's Solomon's House. Bacon's ideas about the unity of learning and the relationship between knowledge, experience, and societal improvement remained extraordinarily powerful in Britain and through much of the continent. Bacon was a touchstone for the Royal Society, from his portrait on the frontispiece of the first history, published in 1667, to the countless references found through the nineteenth century paying homage to his ideas (Huggins).² References to Bacon's *New Atlantis*, the primary published source for ideas about Solomon's House, the ideal of a unified set of institutions to house and encourage the production of knowledge, were current throughout the century.³ In the planning that followed the success

of the Great Exhibition and led to the opening of the South Kensington Museum, Prince Albert and his circle intended the museums to be part of a much larger educational enterprise, one that would consist of learned societies, schools, and a university. Starting in the mid-1850s, various London institutions were courted, cajoled, or manoeuvred into relocating in South Kensington. Nearly all successfully resisted, and again this is a story that is generally told as a failure; the National Gallery's successful fending off of South Kensington's attempts to move it from Trafalgar Square is only one of many examples. But the commissioners were able, instead, to create new institutions that duplicated or critiqued those that resisted the move. The V&A's collections of paintings (modern and English) and sculpture (medieval, Renaissance and Baroque) were a riposte to the policies of the National Gallery, which limited it to collecting Old Master paintings. The Natural History Museum, halved off from the British Museum, duplicated the original mission of the British Museum, in a building almost as large as the parent museum. While few learned societies moved to South Kensington, the commissioners were enormously successful in creating colleges and schools. Their greatest successes were the creation of the Royal College of Science and the City and Guilds Central Technical College in the late 1870s (which merged to form Imperial College in 1907), fulfilling the dream of a technical university in the capital, and then, in 1900, the re-acquisition of London University (which only successfully extricated itself from the embrace of South Kensington in 1936).

The account of the process by which the South Kensington Museum was built up has also been radically simplified, both in terms of the number of museums that at one point or another inhabited the site, and in terms of the process. There is a perception that there was the Great Exhibition and then there was the museum. In reality, large-scale exhibitions on the site continued for another twenty years, and it was through the dynamic process of creating exhibitions and the buildings to house them that the South Kensington site and the collections were successfully built. This process of converting an exhibition and its buildings into a museum was successfully emulated all over the globe. In the United States alone, the major museums in Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and San Francisco are all products of exhibitions; major museums were also the product of exhibitions in Vienna, Brussels, and Munich.

We should also remember that the V&A, so squarely sited and contained on the corner of Exhibition and Cromwell Roads, did not achieve that appearance of unity until quite recently. For over seventy-five years, the collections from India were housed on the west side of Exhibition Road, amid the scientific collections. In other words, central elements of the V&A's collections today were only assimilated physically into it around 1960, and only at that point was the division between science on the west side of the road and art on the east made absolute. The Science Museum was separated from

the V&A administratively in 1909, and we might remember that the Henry Cole wing, one of the more recent additions to the V&A (opened in 1978), was originally the site of Thomas Huxley's laboratories and classrooms.

In other words, there was a long prehistory and a dynamic context as well as a bright future for the Victoria and Albert Museum when it was founded. Examining its continuities with older ideas about museums and education, as well as its connections with larger educational and institutional contexts, is as important as emphasizing the innovations the South Kensington Museum represents. In truth, the South Kensington Museum had many possible futures and many of these came to pass; the creation of the Victoria and Albert Museum is only one of them.

Notes

- 1 For example, the standard recent history of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Baker et al.) does not cite Playfair in its index. The standard histories are Anthony Burton, *Vision & Accident: The Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, V&A Publications, 1999; John Physick, *The Victoria and Albert Museum: The History of Its Buildings*, Phaidon, 1982; and F.H.W. Sheppard, editor, *Survey of London: The Museums Area of South Kensington and Westminster*, Athlone Press, 1975.
- 2 See, for example, Huggins.
- 3 As a further example of the close connection to Bacon felt by members of the Royal Society, see the edition of Bacon's letters by Thomas Birch, secretary to the Royal Society, part of an edition of Bacon's works that was republished throughout the nineteenth century. Richard Yeo provides a more complicated view.

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