



PROJECT MUSE®

The Pantheon on the Mantelpiece

Tom Mole

Victorian Review, Volume 43, Number 1, Spring 2017, pp. 22-25 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vcr.2017.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/685900>

Works Cited

- Barnett, Teresa. *Sacred Relics: Pieces of the Past in Nineteenth-Century America*. U of Chicago P, 2013.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zorn, Pimlico, 1999.
- Black, Barbara J. *On Exhibit: Victorians and Their Museums*. UP of Virginia, 2000.
- Champion & Busby, "Inventory and Valuation." 1902, TS. Cuming Museum, London.
- [Cuming, Henry Syer]. "Catalogue." N.d., MS. TN07894. Cuming Museum, London.
- Cuming, Henry Syer. "Will." N.d., MS. Cuming Museum, London.
- Cuming, Henry. "Letter to George Spencer Perceval." 27 December 1881, MS. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Perceval Bequest, GBR/0280/PERCEVAL/X.
- Greenwood, Thomas. *Museums and Art Galleries*. Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1888.
- "Henry Syer Cuming." *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. 8, 1902, pp. 239–40.
- Humphrey, Stephen. *An Introduction to the Cuming Family and the Cuming Museum*. London Borough of Southwark, 2002.
- Hyacinth, Bryn. "The Ethnographic Collection at the Cuming Museum." *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 20, 2008, pp. 128–44.
- Macdonald, Sharon. "Collecting Practices." *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by Sharon Macdonald, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 81–97.
- Monstresor, C.A. *Some Hobby Horses and How to Ride Them*. W.H. Allen & Co., 1888.
- "A Private Exhibition of Jubilee Mementoes." *Walworth Herald and South London Chronicle*, 1 Oct. 1887, p. 25.
- Robinson, J.C. *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection: Being a Descriptive Inventory of a Collection of Works of Decorative Art Formerly in the Possession of M. Jules Soulages of Toulouse*. Charles Whittingham, 1857.



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

about who would be counted—literally counted at the ballot box—in the present. In *What the Victorians Made of Romanticism*, I describe how the search for a new pantheonic structure quickly gave way to a new kind of pantheon, a museum without walls distributed across the rapidly changing cityscapes of London and Edinburgh and, before long, across the country as a whole. Britain didn't acquire a pantheon in the nineteenth century: it *became* one.

But while the pantheon moved outward from Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral to the parks, streets, and squares of Britain's cities, it also moved inward to the nation's domestic interiors, where it was recreated in miniature. Many of the individuals commemorated in statues, monuments, or plaques were also represented in collectable figurines and busts, creating the possibility of a small-scale museum in the home. A number of collectable figures of Byron and Scott were produced in Staffordshire pottery, Parian (a highly finished kind of porcelain developed in the 1840s, which resembled marble), and spelter (an affordable alternative to bronze).¹ They included busts and full-length figures, both of which were sometimes derived from existing statues of the poets. These artifacts were often marketed in pairs or groups for display on mantelpieces or elsewhere in domestic interiors. Byron was often paired with the "Maid of Athens," and Scott with Robert Burns, and both appeared alongside non-literary figures such as Wellington and Nelson.² Byron and Scott were also routinely paired with each other, and Robert Copeland's catalogue of Parian figures listed several different sizes of busts of Scott "to match Byron" (Copeland 225). When T.S. Eliot wrote "I have always seen, or imagined that I saw, in busts of [Byron and Scott], a certain resemblance in the shape of the head," he was recalling this convention of pairing authors' busts (194).

Buying and displaying these items reiterated the construction of distributed, secular pantheons in London and Edinburgh. Busts of Wordsworth, Shelley, Goethe, and Thomas Moore were also produced, as were those of older poets such as Shakespeare and Dante and modern poets such as Tennyson and Browning. Female poets, however, tended to be underrepresented. The miniature pantheons constituted by potters' catalogues and materialized in private collections, well-appointed private libraries, and tastefully decorated drawing rooms offered what Rohan McWilliam calls "a form of consensus building" producing "kinds of cultural integration" (111). Displayed in the rooms of the house where guests were received, these artifacts occupied liminal sites between public and private that offered a space in which to construct and exhibit one's identity, even if what to display and where was also sometimes a source of disagreement among the members of the household. The subjectivity displayed on the mantelpiece was relationally derived: family portraits displayed kinship connections, a picture of the Queen or a souvenir of the Great Exhibition signalled membership of the nation, and an author's bust or a reproduced print referred to the shared experience of literature or art. The objects on

the mantelpiece reflected back the identities of their owners, much as the mirrors often placed above the mantelpiece reflected back their image.

A key rhetorical aim of the sculpted pantheon had been to move its inhabitants beyond the realm of commerce, just as the commemorative plaques put up in London had to distinguish themselves from advertisements (Mole, "Romantic Memorials"). But when the pantheon was reiterated in the domestic interior, it was also reconciled to commerce. Purchasing a figurine of a canonical individual was a way for citizens to indicate, through consumption, that they concurred in the national consensus, a way to bring one's own desire into conformity with the national self-image and to turn one's private, domestic space into a miniaturized version of public, civic, or institutional space. The sense of belonging that could be obtained by contributing to a subscription fund for a public statue was here transformed into a reason for purchasing a commodity, literally buying into the consensus. Statues of Byron and Scott had been placed at either end of Victorian Britain, from the Scott Monument in Edinburgh's Princes Street (1846) to the statue of Byron at London's Hyde Park Corner (1880); by also placing figures of them at either end of Victorian mantelpieces, individuals could proclaim their membership in a nation with a shared pantheon of heroes. These were the kind of belongings that signified belonging.

Victorian consumers could also carry monuments such as the Scott Monument in their pockets. It appeared on a large number of personal objects, such as card cases, snuff boxes, and vinaigrettes (small boxes containing a sponge soaked in sweet-smelling oil, for warding off noxious odours).³ These boxes were often made of silver and decorated with architectural images, and were known as "castle-top" boxes. Images of Abbotsford and Newstead Abbey were also popular, along with Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral. Individually, these items were affordable to bourgeois consumers, while those with sufficient means could collect them. Card cases, snuff boxes, and vinaigrettes depicting memorials, writers' houses, or pantheonic buildings remediated the pantheon and allowed consumers to possess a version of it among their personal effects.

The typical British middle-class domestic interior in the Victorian period was filled with objects both decorative and functional, including many with sentimental significance; they turned the parlour into a kind of museum, a cabinet of curiosities arranged to form and display a family's identity. Often, these decorative objects made the parlour function as a domestic pantheon of household heroes. If sometimes the choice of heroes was avowedly personal or eccentric, often it was not; our heroes, the objects said to visitors, could—should—be your heroes, too. In this way, displaying figures of past authors and other figures offered a chance to participate in the shared project of creating new forms of cultural consensus about the great men of the past (they were almost all men) in a nation that seemed at times to lack cultural, social, and political cohesion. This kind of display reiterated the

civic pantheon in the domestic interior, just as the well-governed family was often said to be a kind of scaled-down model of the state. It was made possible by the commodities that remediated pantheonic monuments at a more convenient size and price. Buying and displaying these commodities helped to furnish a home but also helped its occupants to feel at home in the Reformed nation.

Notes

- 1 For the Staffordshire figures of Byron, see Pugh figs. 17–21, 27, 28 (492–95); for Scott, see figs. 54, 57 (493, 500–01). For Byron figures in Parian, see Atterbury 93, 135, 186, 228, 230–31; for Scott, see 96, 126, 186, 198, 202, 233, 246.
- 2 As Beaton shows, Wellington was a popular subject for these kinds of artifact.
- 3 For a selection, see Miller 369–71.

Works Cited

- Atterbury, Paul et al, *The Parian Phenomenon: A Survey of Victorian Parian Porcelain Statuary and Busts*. Richard Dennis, 1989.
- Beaton, Belinda. “Materializing the Duke.” *Journal of Victorian Culture* vol. 10, no. 1, 2005, pp. 100–07.
- Copeland, Robert. *Parian: Copeland’s Statuary Porcelain*. Antique Collectors’ Club, 2007.
- Eliot, T.S. “Byron.” *On Poetry and Poets*. Faber and Faber, 1957, pp. 193–206.
- McWilliam, Rohan. “The Theatricality of the Staffordshire Figure.” *Journal of Victorian Culture* vol. 10, no. 1, 2005, pp. 107–14.
- Miller, Judith. *Miller’s Antiques Handbook and Price Guide, 2012–13*. Mitchell Beazley, 2011.
- Mole, Tom. “Romantic Memorials in the Victorian City: The Inauguration of the ‘Blue Plaque’ Scheme, 1868.” *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*. Edited by Dino Franco Felluga, www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=tom-mole-romantic-memorials-in-the-victorian-city-the-inauguration-of-the-blue-plaque-scheme-1868.
- . *What the Victorians Made of Romanticism: Material Artifacts, Cultural Practices, and Reception History*. Princeton UP, 2017.
- “Mr. Disraeli: His Character and Career.” *Edinburgh Review* vol. 97, 1853, pp. 420–61.
- Pugh, P.D. Gordon. *Staffordshire Portrait Figures*, Antique Collectors’ Club, 1987.
- Yarrington, Alison. “Popular and Imaginary Pantheons in Early Nineteenth-Century England.” *Pantheons: Transformations of a Monumental Idea*, edited by Matthew Craske and Richard Wrigley, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 107–21.



The Paper Museum

DEBORAH LUTZ

THIS PAGE of a souvenir album, created by an anonymous Victorian in the mid-nineteenth century, represents a visit to “the home of Charlotte Brontë,” as reads the caption on the oval scrap, showing the parsonage in Haworth (fig. 1). The traveller pasted a snippet with the signature of Patrick Brontë, still living here at the time, underneath, and arranged two