

Museum Meanings

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The museum has been constructed as a symbol in Western society since the Renaissance. This symbol is both complex and multi-layered, acting as a sign for domination and liberation, learning and leisure. As sites for exposition, through their collections, displays and buildings, museums mediate many of society's basic values. But these mediations are subject to contestation, and the museum can also be seen as a site for cultural politics. In post-colonial societies, museums have changed radically, reinventing themselves under pressure from many forces, which include new roles and functions for museums, economic rationalism and moves towards greater democratic access.

Museum Meanings analyses and explores the relationships between museums and their publics. 'Museums' are understood very broadly, to include art galleries, historic sites and historic houses. 'Relationships with publics' is also understood very broadly, including interactions with artefacts, exhibitions and architecture, which may be analysed from a range of theoretical perspectives. These include material culture studies, mass communication and media studies, and learning theories and cultural studies. The analysis of the relationship of the museum to its publics shifts the emphasis from the museum as text, to studies grounded in the relationships of bodies and sites, identities and communities.

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phenomena of social and cultural change; post-modernist theorists examine their effects on many cultural practices. As societies change, the idea of the museum must be reborn. What would the post-museum look like?

The challenge for museums today is to identify the character of new forms of vibrancy that are in tune with the cultural changes that herald the twenty-first century. The idea of the museum needs to be reworked, and much of this will entail the development of an understanding of the relationship between museums and their audiences.⁷⁰ The post-museum is still embryonic; its identity is still overshadowed by the personalities and characters of its parent. But it is struggling to emerge, and some of its distinctiveness is becoming clear. In the struggle of the post-museum to develop its own identity, it will need to examine its heritage critically, and find ways to adapt long-standing family practices to the new circumstances within which it will find itself. The chapters which follow discuss some of those elements of the post-museum's inheritance which seem at the present time to be in the most pressing need of analysis and development in order to shape the character of this new museum idea.

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Picturing the ancestors and imag(in)ing the nation

The collections of the first decade of the National Portrait Gallery, London

Museum collections have the power of representation. Groups of objects, brought together in one place to form a collection and then displayed, make visual statements. The beliefs, attitudes and values which underpin the processes of acquisition become embodied in the collections, as some objects are privileged and others are left to one side. The public display of these collections makes a visual narrative which naturalises these underpinning assumptions and which gives them the character of inevitability and common sense. The presentation of what appears to be (and is) visual evidence, materialises and thereby appears to confirm the 'reality' and the inevitability of these visual pictures. The apparent completeness and the unification of the presented image renders the work of its construction, and the selection processes that were deployed, invisible. In addition, collections may have been acquired over long periods of time, but their intended trajectory will have been established from the first. Founding structures, with their ideological underpinnings, shape the displays that we see today.

Portraits make particularly powerful visual statements. Images of people form part of the world of the everyday; in the West, images of those important to us are familiar parts of everyday domestic life. They encode our memories and emotions and thus are held dear to us. Portraits are less frequently sold by their owners than other kinds of paintings; they embody ancestral links and are passed from generation to generation to ensure continuity.¹ At the same time, we are also surrounded by images of those who govern and manage us; the carrying of symbolic portraits is one element of the display of protest or aggression. Portraits have the character of familiarity.

Presented as a display, groups of portraits illustrate relationships between people, demonstrating the importance of certain groups through their exposition and, by implication, the lack of importance of those left unseen. Portrait galleries are intended to hold up certain groups of people for admiration and emulation, of, for example, standards of beauty, achievement and social behaviour. The pedagogic role of portrait galleries is thus open to being a moral one, achieved through the assembling and bringing to meaning of certain pieces of visual culture.

Portrait galleries play a specific role in picturing significant members of societies. They are produced when a need is felt to capture and ground in concrete form

an idea of general importance. A portrait gallery makes tangible the ephemeral, makes visible the imagined, and offers a powerful space for pedagogy.

The National Portrait Gallery in London was established in 1856, at a time when the boundaries of the British Empire were so extensive that they encompassed one in every five inhabitants of the globe.² Objects were flowing into Britain from these extremities at an ever increasing rate. As these objects found their ways into collections and began to illustrate, map and plot out corners of the Empire, so it became important to map the heart of this empire. One of the projects of the modern period has been the collecting together of a vast archive, to document, to control and to place the peoples of the world in relationships of domination and subservience. As the establishment of museums got slowly underway in nineteenth-century Britain, a collection emerged that would act as the public face of the managers of this collected world. The National Portrait Gallery enabled the achievement of that peculiarly masculine aspect of English culture, the representation of the self to the self.³ This self was pictured as the nation.

The museum in modern culture: constructing master narratives

The museum has been called emblematic of the modern period.⁴ One of the characteristics of the modern period has been the construction of master narratives,⁵ grand narratives, universal stories, that were intended to stand as valid outside the context of the site from which they were spoken. These master narratives were intended to enable mastery of the messy and complicated real world. As Barthes said: 'Is it not the characteristic of reality to be unmasterable? And is it not the characteristic of system to master it?'⁶

Master narratives are created by presenting a large-scale picture, by eliminating complicating and contradictory detail, by disguising difference, by hiding those elements that don't quite fit, and by emphasising those that do. Unity rather than difference is emphasised; gaps that emerge when the story doesn't quite work are filled somehow, and those things that would have shown a different interpretation of events are excluded. The whole is naturalised through links to other supporting discourses. A homogeneous mapping is produced, the constructed character of which is not often readily apparent, partly because of the confidence with which it is usually projected, and partly because of the network of other supporting material. These master narratives are therefore naturalised as universal, true, and inevitable.

Museum narratives are constructed through bringing together onto one site diverse objects from a range of different sources. Brought together, they are then sorted, classified, and ordered through display into a visual narrative. Each individual item is given its significance by being placed within a larger group, and by the story that is told by this particular conjunction of artefacts. The master narratives that museums construct depend on a number of techniques of inclusion or exclusion. These include hierarchies of value (which relate to the intentions of

the museum), authenticity (the object is both there to be observed and is presented as 'the real thing'), and verifiable knowledge (the provenance of an object demonstrated through documentation). These combinations produce apparently reliable and trustworthy material evidence.

Museums create master narratives through acting as both the constructor of a present-day 'reality' and through bringing into focus a memory of the past that (coincidentally) supports that present. Museum master narratives concern Art, Nature, Man [*sic*], and Nation. From these constructions, broad views of the world and the place of individuals and peoples within it emerge. 'The nation' is a powerful and enduring master narrative, although the modern sense of the word was not familiar before the eighteenth century.⁷ The 'nation' is itself an artefact.⁸ During the nineteenth century, the 'nation' was constructed, in part, through the arts and museums. Major themes for its construction were citizenship, unity and education. On all of these fronts, museums could be used as enabling technologies.

Museums are major apparatuses in the creation of national identities. They illustrate the nation as cultured, as elevated in taste, as inclusive and as paternal. Visual representations are a key element in symbolising and sustaining national communal bonds. Such representations are not just reactive, depicting an existing state of being, they are also purposefully creative and they can generate new social and political formations. Through the persistent production of certain images and the suppression of others, and through controlling the way images are viewed or artefacts are preserved, visual representations can be used to produce a view of the nation's history.⁹

The utility of culture: museums in mid-nineteenth-century-Britain

At the beginning of the nineteenth century in Britain, government had a limited scope. As the century progressed, the state enlarged its sphere of operation and its power to influence and control those who became understood as its citizens.¹⁰ The greater involvement in political matters that the various extensions of the franchise enabled raised concerns about the ability of the electorate to act responsibly and consequently the need for education became seen as a priority.¹¹ By the end of the century, education for all was accepted as a state responsibility, as were health and welfare. Responsibility for state subsidies to the arts was embraced with more reluctance, and even when funding was forthcoming it was generally limited and somewhat stunted the growth of the arts and museums. However, during the century the arts increased markedly in significance, with the audience for them shifting from one limited to the aristocracy and upper classes to one that included the middle and lower classes. During this period of rapid population increase, the fear of what was conceptualised as a 'mob', or a mass, combined with the perceived need for education, would provide new roles for the arts and museums.

Perceptions of the function of the arts and museums shifted over the century. By the 1850s, a generally agreed group of purposes had emerged. The arts were

understood to have a clear moral purpose. They could act in social improvement, and as a form of public education.

Henry Cole expressed the idea clearly in 1853:

‘Indeed, a Museum presents probably the only effectual means of educating the adult, who cannot be expected to go to school like the youth, and the necessity for teaching the grown man is quite as great as that of training the child. By proper arrangements a Museum may be made in the highest degree instructional. If it be connected with lectures, and means are taken to point out its uses and applications, it becomes elevated from being a mere unintelligible lounge for idlers into an impressive schoolroom for everyone.’¹²

The arts could be open to all classes of society, and in their enjoyment the lower classes would become both more like their betters and more easily governable. Allan Cunningham, a writer on art and artists, illustrated popular responses to the National Gallery by describing ‘poor mechanics there, sitting wondering and marvelling over those fine works, and having no other feeling but that of pleasure or astonishment; they have no notion of destroying them . . .’ When asked to specify the class of people he was referring to, he said: ‘Men who are usually called “mob”; but they cease to become mob when they get a taste.’¹³

By the end of the nineteenth century different views on the relationships of the arts to society prevailed. Ideas of using the arts to promote inclusion and unity had largely given way to a view that the arts constituted a sphere separate from the everyday, one that was only accessible to those who had a specific sensibility, who had taste ‘naturally’. By the end of the century, the art museum had largely ceased to act as a pedagogic institution,¹⁴ although some few galleries had been established with specifically philanthropic purposes.¹⁵ However, as they emerged, museums of natural history and ethnography would continue to be seen as educational instruments.

By mid-century the British middle classes were becoming more established. A range of reforms in the first half of the century had opened the way for the wider social participation of a critical sector of the middle class, which partly enabled the consolidation of former disparate interests into a powerful unified culture.¹⁶ The economy was growing at an extraordinary rate; it was a period of increasing parliamentary power, constitutional debate, and colonial expansion.¹⁷ However, an emptiness in the cultural sphere had opened up: with the wars against France at an end, and with the American colonies lost, these external definers of the British nation were no longer potent. It became necessary to find new ways of defining the nation, and one of these ways would be through its depiction in material images.

During the first half of the century, Britain lagged behind continental Europe in the provision of cultural organisations. France had established a national gallery, the Louvre, in 1793, and the Swedish had followed suit a year later; the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam was founded in 1808 and the Prado in Madrid in

1819; but Britain waited for a national gallery until 1824.¹⁸ In Europe, former princely collections had been handed over to the state; the Louvre was based on former royal collections, the Uffizi in Florence, based on the collections of the Medici family, was handed over to the state of Tuscany in 1737, and the Albertina in Vienna opened as a national collection in Austria in 1781. In Britain the Royal collections remained intact, and, in comparison with European nations, the British nation looked weak. Britain had also fallen behind in design education, such that British products were demonstrably inferior to those of the French. Trade and industry were affected. Parliament established the Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures which sat during 1835 and 1836 to review the state of the arts in Britain, and the need for art and design education.

The review revealed a strongly held view that local museums and galleries would be useful to provide models for industrial design, and in raising the quality of British art and national taste.¹⁹ It was thought that working people would welcome the opportunity to visit museums if the opening hours were appropriate. The evidence of contemporaries suggests that by the 1840s the more educated working classes were using museums as forms of entertainment and places of instruction.²⁰ In 1845, the Museums Act licensed any town with more than 10,000 people to open museums, although this was not mandatory.²¹ At the same time, however, an older view of the arts as property was indicated in the Museums Bill which was entitled ‘A Bill for the Protection of Property contained in Public Museums, Galleries, Cabinets, Libraries and other Public Repositories, from Malicious Injuries’. This Bill introduced particularly severe punishments for those who sought to damage works of arts in public collections: imprisonment, hard labour and whipping.

Museums and galleries were imbued with complex functions in the nineteenth century. For radicals, access to the arts and culture on the part of the working classes was a mode of self-education. Others were less philanthropic, and accorded to the arts and museums a civilising function that was closer to that of control, taming ‘the mob’ through the contemplation of things of beauty. Gladstone, for example, stated that the arts, as ‘the highest instruments of human cultivation are also the guarantee of public order’.²² Museums were seen as capable of solving internal problems of social unrest, and could be used to bind the lower classes into the main body of society.

However, museums and galleries could also be used on a broader stage – that of the nation itself. At the national level, museums were signs of the secular religion of nationalism, indices of a general maturity of taste and level of civilisation, as well as markers of the responsibility of the state towards those for whom it was gradually becoming more responsible. In France, the Louvre had an intentional remit to educate and elevate its citizens. In Britain, by mid-century, there were a number of state-funded art institutions that performed these functions. The British Museum, the Royal Academy, and the National Gallery had preceded the Museum of Manufactures (which would become, in turn, the Museum of Ornamental Art, the South Kensington Museum, and then the Victoria and Albert Museum) that was established following the 1851 Great Exhibition.

If the existing museums displayed art and design, no museum in Britain at this time provided a perspective on history. As the nation-state became more powerful, it became necessary both to position it historically and to picture it so that it could be identified, understood and imagined as the heart of Empire. As the peripheries of the nation were mapped in increasing detail through the collections brought back by travellers, missionaries and colonial administrators and officials, so it became necessary to materialise the centre. It became imperative to picture the nation through a pantheon of its heroes.

A new master narrative: the National Portrait Gallery in London

The British nation-state was (and is) constructed and defined through the institutions which comprise it, institutions of education, culture and governance. The National Portrait Gallery, London, is one of these institutions, whose specific task in the mid-nineteenth century was to picture the nation, to legitimate its character, and to construct its past. It achieved this, in part, through the depiction of an 'imagined community',²³ a community that drew its constituents from the past (those who were to be viewed), and from the present (those who were to be the viewers). The intersections of these imaged and corporeal bodies, juxtaposed through imagined connections between the past and the contemporary, created a new cultural nodal point, one that was constituted through perceptions of the identity of the nation which were deeply cut through with assumptions about class, gender and race. As it became more deeply embedded during the second half of the century, this picture of the nation would be underpinned by theories of social evolution which proposed, ultimately, a master class and a master race.²⁴ The emerging British middle class saw itself in the image of this master class and sought to construct a representation that demonstrated this position. The main themes of this representation were nationalism, unity, masculinity and history. Part of the developing middle-class public sphere, the National Portrait Gallery in London pictured a historical and individualised vision of the British nation, the heart of an immense empire.

The 'national portrait gallery' as an idea had already been introduced through certain publications, bound collections of prints, which were issued periodically. By the 1850s this weak materialisation was poised to be established as something altogether stronger and more significant, a fully fledged institution which would act to define the nation-state through the promotion of the middle-class values of capitalism, individualism and freedom.

One of the methods used was the adaption of the strategies and tactics of power employed by the traditional leaders of society. Since the seventeenth century, the aristocracy (and the gentry to a lesser degree) had owned collections of paintings, with among them collections of family portraits. Family portraits, hanging in the family home, acted as visible and tangible witnesses to the family claim to rule, and demonstrated the permanence of their lineage. By the late 1830s, industrialists, financiers, and commercial magnates were replacing these noble connoisseurs as the country's major art collectors, and the middle classes were

beginning to develop their own preferences and tastes in art.²⁵ By the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth, a range of government-funded art galleries and museums would be established across the country which would attest to the wealth, power, taste and social responsibility of the state. But more important than this was the need to picture the face of the state, to display the ancestors and the history of the nation.

The emergence of the National Portrait Gallery was a particularly specific articulation of the right to power: it enabled the 'family' and antecedents of the nation-state to be hung up for public inspection, tangible testimonials to the right to rule. Where aristocratic portraits had been viewed only by close family and social associates, the picturing of the nation was open to all, to an imagined community of visitors that in itself also represented the nation.

Pointon²⁶ has chronicled in detail the foundation of the National Portrait Gallery. I want here to draw attention to some of the statements made about the functions and intentions of the new institution which reveal the strategies and tactics that it would deploy to achieve its objectives. Earl Stanhope addressed the House of Lords on 4 March 1856, and a resolution was duly passed asking if the Queen would be graciously pleased to consider the 'expediency of forming a Gallery of the Portraits of the most eminent Persons in British history'.²⁷ During the debate, Stanhope quoted from a letter of support he had received from Sir Charles Eastlake, president of the Royal Academy and Director of the National Gallery and who went on to become a founding trustee of the NPG:

'Whenever I hear of portraits for sale of historical interest I cannot help wishing that a gallery could be formed exclusively for authentic likenesses of celebrated individuals, not necessarily with reference to the merit of the works of art. I believe that an extensive gallery of portraits with catalogues containing good and short biographical notices would be useful in many ways and especially as a not unimportant element of education.'²⁸

These sentences indicate some of the elements that would come together to form the gallery as a site of representation. The portraits were to be of people who were 'celebrated individuals' in the history of Britain; the parliamentary resolution had referred to people who were 'eminent' in British history. One of the main aims of the new institution was to represent a national past through its important individuals, its heroes. But how was this history of the nation to be structured? What was deemed appropriate for inclusion, and what would be left out? What categories of eminence were to be constructed and how?

During the debate in the House of Lords, it was suggested that heroes and discoverers should be represented. But should the representation be broader than this, to include those whose names stood for the maintenance and development of the whole national tradition? The distinction is an interesting one and the decision would clearly be crucial for the way that the new collection would develop: 'Heroes and discoverers' was a narrow grouping; the individuals who had formed 'the whole national tradition' could include more broadly those

involved in religion, governance, the arts and other appropriate areas. The decision to take the broader view reveals the essentially middle-class nature of the enterprise; the adoption of broader and vaguer categories allowed for a freer and less restricted hand in deciding who could be admitted to the national pantheon, and allowed for flexibility in the categories for inclusion as circumstances changed. The portraits collected during the first ten years of the Gallery reveal how 'the national tradition' was invented, imagined and represented through images.

The establishment of the National Portrait Gallery represents an effort to select from and structure the past in order to present the mid-nineteenth-century state as the natural bearer of power. This structuring of the past had a range of excellent models on which to build. The most obvious was perhaps the aristocratic family portrait collection, some of which made reference to gendered portrait assemblages popular in Europe since the sixteenth century, collections of heroes (men) and beauties (women).²⁹ A second model was that of the collection of Edward Hyde, Lord Clarendon, who had written a history of the English Civil War, and as part of the same enterprise had assembled a large collection of historical portraits which has been described as an ancestor of the National Portrait Gallery.³⁰

The third model is in some ways the most interesting. With the growth of publishing houses and a corresponding market for books, a proliferation of 'National Portrait Galleries' had occurred – collections of prints that were published as part-binders, sometimes with accompanying biographies or texts. These collections were of illustrious and eminent individuals, but were not, at first, described at a national level. It was not until the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century that the national character was stressed, at a time when the need for a national identity became more pronounced. These collections operated both locally and nationally, bringing together their own imagined communities. At the local level we find collections of local gentry, justices of the peace, bishops and landowners.³¹ At the national level, the collection consisted of portraits of kings, queens, rulers and political heroes.³²

These print collections illustrate the central and local distribution of power that was to be found in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, where national rulers and local hierarchies of power combined in structures of control.³³ Both the local and national collections celebrate the power and status of the individual, and give expression to what could well be called 'the national tradition'. In addition, these collections construct both the wealthy middle-class subject and those of more limited means as connoisseurs:³⁴ instead of collecting full-scale paintings which were expensive and required a great deal of space, the collection of prints enabled a more humble form of collection. These two-dimensional portrait galleries of national heroes and local notables and worthies opened a space of semiosis that would be more fully developed in a three-dimensional way by the National Portrait Gallery and its collections.

The social functions of the National Portrait Gallery

One of the main functions of the National Portrait Gallery, in common with other contemporary museums both in Britain and in Europe, was education. During the discussion of the financial vote on 6 June, this was clarified by Palmerston, the Prime Minister. First he robustly dismissed an objection made by one MP:

'Now Sir, this is a very small Vote. It must not be supposed that we are going to ransack country houses to collect pictures of gentlemen's uncles and aunts. That is not the object . . .'³⁵

He went on to outline the educational value of the proposed institution:

'There cannot I feel convinced, be a greater incentive to mental exertion, to noble actions, to good conduct on the part of the living than for them to see before them the features of those who have done things which are worthy of our admiration and whose example we are more induced to imitate when they are brought before us in the visible and tangible shape of portraits.'³⁶

The Gallery was intended to encourage and enable 'mental exertion', 'noble actions', and 'good conduct'. Encoded within these prescriptions were contemporary social values. 'Mental exertion' – signifying intellectual work as opposed to manual labour, was highly valued in a progressive bourgeois society, where merit was deemed as important as high birth. Many Members of the House of Commons, for example, had achieved their position through effort rather than through the family name. In fact, the main characteristic of the middle class was that it was a body of persons of power and influence, independent of the power of birth and status. To belong to this class, a man had to be recognised as someone who counted *as an individual*, whether as an industrialist, a university professor, a lawyer or a doctor.³⁷

'Noble actions' – here there is a moral emphasis and an appeal to a self-denying, high-minded, pure way of life, as summed up in the *noblesse oblige* attitude of the philanthropic aristocracy. This was an attitude that was still admired and that could equally, in fact, describe the activities of the benevolent state. Noble actions were those of which society as a whole might be proud, and were claimed to be those that signified national identity. Linda Colley has pointed out how the anti-slavery movement, for example, was one way in which Britons could assert a British citizen's right to freedom as a vital component of a specifically British identity. This positioned Britain as superior to both the Americans and the French. Anti-slavery became an emblem of national virtue during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and this moral imperative remained potent for some time after Britain pulled out of the international slave trade (in 1807) and abolished slavery in the British West Indies (in 1833).³⁸ Assumed superior moral integrity underpinned Britain's claim to be the arbiter of both the 'civilised' and the 'uncivilised' worlds, and was one way of demonstrating that British power in the world was due to more than merely industrial and economic success.

Those who were unable to deploy either mental exertion or noble actions were exhorted to maintain ‘good conduct’. This inducement to good behaviour, to a clean and proper way of living, lay at the heart of the purposes of museums at this time.³⁹

The National Portrait Gallery was intended to raise the national character through the display of those ‘who are worthy of our admiration’. In 1856 these people were described as celebrated individuals, eminent in British history. The 1949 catalogue describes in more precise terms the collection as it had evolved by that time. The portraits are described as those of ‘kings and rulers, the heads of religious and secular foundations, chiefs of families and local worthies’.⁴⁰ These categories relate closely to those of the part-binder collections of the early nineteenth-century, indicating a continuity of idea. These are clearly powerful and dominating individuals in many spheres. The structures of areas of power suggested by these categories operate as an index of governance and control (see Table 2.1).

Within these categories of individuals are inscribed the major systems of social management; firstly, the fundamental patriarchal system with the king envisioned as the father of the nation, and the chiefs of families who hold power in local areas both over their own families and over neighbouring families of lesser social significance. Secondly, the administrative system is plotted both centrally – rulers – and locally – local worthies (local gentry and lesser members of the aristocracy). Thirdly, the systems of moral and social control are inscribed through the heads of religious and secular foundations – churches and schools. These individuals have attained celebrity both by ascription through birth (kings) and by achievement (rulers). The possibility of social mobility that had opened up with industrialisation and modernisation, where entrepreneurial and capitalist endeavours had enabled a degree of penetration of the traditional structures of power, is inscribed into the fabric of the discourse of the museum.

The description of the categories of eminence reveals a view of society that is stratified and hierarchical, but one where social mobility is a real possibility if specific individuals are possessed of sufficient moral worth and power. Society is, of course, fundamentally patriarchal (monarchs are kings, not queens). It is organised with a strong generating centre, which supports an active periphery, which is itself organised in terms of both central and peripheral power, and is

Table 2.1 Structures of local and national power embodied in the categories of the portraits at the National Portrait Gallery during the first decade of the nineteenth century

	<i>Centre</i>	<i>Local</i>
Fundamental patriarchal system	Kings	Chiefs of families
Administrative system	Rulers	Local worthies
Moral and social control	Heads of religious and secular foundations	

connected through many links to the centre. There is a strong underpinning notion of the organisation and administration of Britain as a unified nation, managed tightly and competently through individuals worthy of respect and emulation.

Disguised in these categories is the extent to which this well-managed and efficient nation-state was dependent on peripheries external to its own territories. In Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, although slavery had been abolished, the wealth of the trade had been the route to local power and influence for many. Much of the industrial wealth of Britain was dependent on workers and products from overseas. The wealth of the colonies would continue to pour into Britain for the next hundred years. A constant traffic existed between this compact heart and the many cultures and communities that lay outside it. The categories of the collections of the National Portrait Gallery perfectly described the centre/margin structure of both imperialism and colonialism. But how did these collections begin? On what basis were the first portraits collected and what categories of distinction emerged from the early collections?

The portraits of the first ten years

The establishment of the National Portrait Gallery was agreed in March 1856. The new gallery set itself specific criteria for collection.⁴¹ In making purchases or receiving donations, the Trustees would look to the celebrity of the individual pictured rather than the merit of the artist who had produced the portrait. The historical character of the Gallery was secured from the beginning. Celebrity would be estimated ‘without bias to any political or religious party’, and faults and errors on the part of the individual under consideration would not be regarded as a problem. Portraits of living people would not be accepted, with the exception of ‘the reigning sovereign and . . . his or her consort’. (Exceptions were allowed for groups of people, some living and others deceased.) No portrait was to be accepted as a donation unless three-quarters of the Trustees present agreed; and no modern copy of an original was to be admitted. An early copy of these Rules is annotated by the hand of George Scharf, the first Secretary to the Trustees, who adds some Private Rules, which decree that ‘Three shall be a quorum; Purchase shall be decided by the majority; Casting vote with Chairman; Scry [*sic*] to record votes when required to do so.’

During the first year of operation only one portrait was acquired. The Chandos portrait of Shakespeare was donated by the Earl of Ellesmere as a symbolic inaugural gesture. This portrait was at the time accorded emblematic status. Shakespeare was seen as the archetypal successful individual, a man whose personal power was due to mental exertion rather than to family status. As a British hero he was unshakeable. The portrait was thought to be from life, and was therefore authentic. Given as a gift by a member of the aristocracy, this portrait of a non-aristocratic hero perfectly expressed the partnership of power that existed between the middle classes and the older ruling elite.⁴²

By February 1857 collecting had begun in earnest, but the pace was slow, with about twenty-five items being added per year. By Christmas 1866, 225 portraits

had been acquired. George Scharf lists them for the visitor to 29 Great George Street, Westminster, which was the temporary home of the Gallery at that time.⁴³ The works are listed alphabetically as they were displayed throughout the house. The early collection was embryonic,⁴⁴ but set the model for the future. What do these 225 portraits show about the way in which the British nation was being imagined? What lessons does this picture teach?

Scharf's Christmas list gives a certain amount of information about the portraits. First, the names of the sitters are given, accompanied with the dates of birth and death (where known). Sometimes, a further detail is added: for example, 'John Law, inventor of the Mississippi scheme; 1681–1729. Queen Mary II., Consort of King William III.; 1662–1694.' The names of the artists are also listed, and donations are indicated by an asterisk. The works are grouped according to where they are displayed within the building, but little information is given that indicates the category of eminence into which the sitters fall. Many of the sitters would probably have been known to the visitor (Coleridge, Dr. Parr, James Watt had all died in recent decades). Where details are supplied, they give interpretive information: 'General Sir Thomas Picton, killed at Waterloo, 1758–1815; Earl of Sandwich, after whom the Sandwich islands are named; 1718–1792.'

Of more use in identifying the categories of eminence and distinction is the *Consecutive List of Portraits* printed for the Trustees in 1909.⁴⁵ The registration number of each work is noted in order of acquisition, as is the name of the sitter. Whether the portrait was acquired through purchase or donation is specified, and the name of the person from whom it was acquired, with the date, by month of acquisition. For example, we learn that in February 1857 a portrait of William Wilberforce (NPG 3) was donated to the gallery by Sir R. H. Inglis. On 23 March 1857, a portrait of Dr Parr (NPG 9) was purchased from Messrs Colnaghi, and in February 1858, a portrait of Joseph Wright (NPG 29) was given by W. M. Rossetti.

The most recent catalogue of the collections⁴⁶ gives more information about sitters' identities and some further details about the portraits and their history. Here we learn that NPG 3 is a canvas 96.5 × 109.2 cm (38 × 43 in) painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence. William Wilberforce, the anti-slavery campaigner, is described as a 'philanthropist and reformer'. Dr Parr was a 'pedagogue and Whig pamphleteer'. Joseph Wright is described as 'Wright of Derby – painter', but as NPG 29 is labelled 'See Unknown Sitters' it may be inferred that the portrait has subsequently been proved not to have been of the painter after all. In 'Unknown Sitters' we find NPG 29 languishing sadly along with many others who remain unidentified.

The 1981 catalogue adds a gloss to the 1909 List of Portraits. Working between the two documents it is possible to compile outline data concerning the identity, dates, status and social role of the sitter, the identity of the artist, the medium of the portrait (painting, drawing, medallion, bust) and how the object was acquired. From this information a number of loosely shaped groups into which the portraits fall may be suggested, and from this the most important categories of distinction, and their significance, may be extrapolated.

Caution must be exercised in defining these groups, as there are a number of difficulties. Firstly, the main descriptors (e.g. painter, poet, philanthropist, reformer, judge, scholar) that are used in this study to compile the groups are taken from the 1981 catalogue. This is itself based on earlier catalogues, and especially one compiled in 1970.⁴⁷ The descriptors seem reasonably stable, but none the less, it is possible that the groups into which the portraits appear to fall may relate as much to late twentieth-century perceptions as to mid-nineteenth-century intentions. Secondly, although broad groups can be suggested, some sitters are defined such that they could be placed in more than one category. Sir Walter Raleigh, for example, is described as soldier, sailor and author. Although most of the sitters are described along one index of activity, several are not. In this case, the first descriptor has been used in this study. Thirdly, with a small number of the works, approximately fifteen, the original identities have been reassessed, and although nine of these can be traced and accounted for, it is beyond the scope of this analysis to account for the remainder. The original identities are used for the purposes of this analysis, as it is these that caused the work to be accepted in the first place. Finally, the identification of the artists has become more reliable as scholarship has progressed since initial purchase. The authenticity of the works is assessed from the perspective of the 1981 catalogue, but it must be remembered that earlier misattributions to some extent reflect the information available at the time. In addition some sitters are represented more than once (I have counted each image rather than each sitter), and some of the images are relatively insignificant (but all are here considered equally). Group portraits have been omitted from the analysis. The picture of the first ten years of collecting can be drawn in outline only.

Bearing in mind these caveats, how can we analyse the portraits of the first ten years? The portraits date from the earliest days of portraiture up to the period immediately before the opening of the gallery. In a first and preliminary analysis the portraits fall readily into groups concerned with the field of interest, status and gender of the sitter, the mode of acquisition, and the 'authenticity' of the portrait.

One of the most striking divisions is that between men and women. There are twenty-two portraits of women; all the others (203) are of men. The largest and most significant groups turn out to be those into which the male portraits fall, where descriptors of eminence and distinction are both more numerous and much more finely graded. Although there are a number of sub-groups, these can be put together to form a broader outline picture which consists of five major groups. The largest group of works is that of men who have occupied a range of public positions of leadership, administration or governance; this group consists of statesmen and diplomats (51), colonial administrators (5), judges (7), naval officers (10), military officers (11), one explorer, and one financier. Many of those represented occupied the highest levels; the group of statesmen and diplomats includes four Prime Ministers,⁴⁸ two Lord Chancellors⁴⁹ and a president of the United States.⁵⁰ The naval officers include eight Admirals and one First Lord of the Admiralty, and the military group contains seven at the level of General or above.

The second largest group is that of people concerned with the arts, with thirty-eight writers and poets (Burns, Dryden, Keats, Congreve, Richardson, Byron, Pepys, Blake), seventeen painters and other artists, three actors and one musician (Handel). A further group of works can be assembled concerned with the sciences to include portraits of six engineers, eight doctors and physicians, five scientists (only three sitters as there are three portraits of Joseph Priestley [1733–1804], two of which are medals). Then there are twenty churchmen (which includes archbishops, bishops, cardinals, one apostle of temperance and two coal-heavers and preachers), seven philosophers and three educationalists. There are ten portraits of male members of Royal families.

There are twenty-two portraits of women. These include fourteen of queens and princesses, two writers, one actress, one courtier (Elizabeth Hamilton, the Countess of Gramont, who is referred to as 'La Belle Hamilton'), one connoisseur, one philanthropist (Elizabeth Fry) and one woman who is given no descriptor outside her family affiliations. She is Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury (1518–1608), 'Bess of Hardwick', wife of the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury. In addition, a painting of Nell Gwyn, thought to be by Peter Lely, was purchased in 1858, which was later re-identified as being of Catherine, Countess of Dorchester.

The male portraits can be divided into five broad groups of recognisable and worthy activities: public leaders (86), the arts (59), science (19), religion (20), philosophy and education (10), and royalty (10). With the female portraits there are far fewer categories and they are less clear-cut and recognisable. The largest is that of 'Royalty', and here many of the queens are consorts of kings. One of the women, Bess of Hardwick, defies identity except as herself. One, Nell Gwyn, takes her place as a King's mistress, although this role is not identified in the early references to the portrait.

Fields of social activity are pictured as much more complex, active and multi-layered for men than are the social roles for women. Men appear actively involved in leadership as military or naval commanders, as governors or politicians. They are engaged to the full in the arts of writing, painting, the theatre and, to a lesser degree, music. They are represented as educationalists, engineers, astronomers, and philosophers. They control the Church, from the level of archbishop to that of coal-heaver and preacher, and of course, many of them, as kings, are hereditary rulers.

Outside the field of 'Royalty', there are very few women represented. Where they are, many of the images themselves are not strong. Elizabeth Fry is represented by a miniature.⁵¹ The painting of Bess of Hardwick is by an unknown artist.⁵² Of the other six images of non-royal women, three are studio copies⁵³ and one is a small drawing.⁵⁴ Of the fourteen portraits of royal women, only four are original works by named artists, and of these one is a miniature⁵⁵ and one a very small watercolour;⁵⁶ of the others, six are from known studios and three are by unknown artists. One, of Mary Queen of Scots, is a plaster copy of a monument.⁵⁷ The representation of women is limited, both in number and the quality of the work, (although it is true that many of the male portraits are also of similar quality). Apart from the 'Royalty' category, the portraits of women are marginal to the main collection.

How were these portraits acquired? When the Gallery was first agreed in Parliament, a leader in *The Times* suggested that if the Government provided a building, it would be fair to expect a considerable number of donations: 'Ours is a country of old-established houses, great wealth and no small patriotism. Hardly a family of old standing does not possess a work that would fitly take its place in such a collection'.⁵⁸ It had also been suggested that societies might like to donate some of their portraits to this national endeavour. By Christmas 1866 just under one-third of the collection had been donated, seventy-one portraits in all,⁵⁹ and only one society had come up with the goods. This was the Mines Royal, Mineral and Battery Societies, which gave a panel portrait of Queen Elizabeth I in 1865.⁶⁰ Many of the donations came from the old aristocratic families appealed to by *The Times*, but the opportunity to memorialise relatives and consequently the family as a whole was also taken up by others. A marble bust of George Tierney (1761–1830) was given by his son in 1864,⁶¹ for example, and the widow of Richard Cobden (1804–1865) presented a bust of her husband to the gallery in 1868, three years after a painting of him had been purchased.

The founding rules for the Trustees of the National Portrait Gallery stated that in looking to the celebrity of the person represented in any portrait they might be thinking of acquiring, they would 'attempt to estimate that celebrity without bias as to any political or religious party',⁶² and it is true that men from many different parts of the political spectrum are represented. However, it was not the aim of the Gallery to promote a specific political perspective, but rather to convert a well-established aristocratic power tactic in order to promote the power of the nation-state. In constructing a public site for the display of portraits, the progressive middle class acted in partnership with the traditional elite, the aristocracy and landed gentry, and in doing so, secured both the tactics and the opportunity to be depicted and imagined as powerful, natural rulers. Parliament, the legislative and governing body of the state, had appointed a group of Trustees who were, on the whole, from the aristocracy. By being publicly displayed in the company of leaders and heroes from the past, the immediate predecessors of the national administration were given recognition as appropriate rulers; by using the social and cultural capital of the aristocratic Trustees, Parliament ensured the establishment of a worthwhile cultural institution. On both accounts, the state benefited.

The founding Trustees enabled the National Portrait Gallery to be meshed with contemporary discourses of museums, art and history. Earl Stanhope, the first Chair, had been appointed Trustee of the British Museum and President of the Society of Antiquaries in 1846. Sir Charles Eastlake was President of the Royal Academy and the first Director of the National Gallery. The Earls of Ellesmere and Wemyss both owned substantial personal collections. William Hookham Carpenter was Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. Lord Macaulay and Sir Francis Palgrave were historians, and the latter also Keeper of the Public Records Office. On the death of the Earl of Ellesmere shortly after the opening of the Gallery, they were joined by Thomas Carlyle, whose book *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History*, had been published in 1841.⁶³

Three other Trustees were aristocrats powerful in Parliament, Lord Robert Cecil as both Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister.⁶⁴

The representation of the eminent and distinguished at the National Portrait Gallery demonstrated the partnership between the old and new rulers. It is difficult to distinguish all the landed gentry who are represented in the first 225 portraits without a very detailed knowledge of the families concerned, but it is possible to identify the aristocracy, who are generally conveniently labelled with a title such as earl, baron or lord. Images of non-aristocrats, most of which are by definition part of the middle classes, make up just under two-thirds of the total number of portraits. The gender split is particularly interesting: where about one-third of the male portraits are of aristocrats, four-fifths of the female portraits are from the highest levels of society. Ideas about gender united men across class divisions.⁶⁵ The construction of femininity implied dependence within a family structure, just as the construction of masculinity implied the responsibility for dependants (women, children and the lower classes) achieved through success in the public sphere.

Women were largely excluded from the new public world that was emerging at this time.⁶⁶ They had a very limited role in political, professional, or cultural fields, and so could only be represented where their power and influence was due to their family status. With men, the opposite was the case: the achievements of individual politicians, professionals, or other holders of significant positions due to the exercise of mental exertion outnumber the achievements through family status.

It is interesting to note the relationships of aristocratic and non-aristocratic portraits within the five broad groups identified above. Most of the portraits of aristocrats fall into the groups of portraits of leaders and of churchmen. In the arts and sciences, the numbers of aristocrats are very small indeed. Clearly in the field of the arts, the middle class comes into its own. The doctors, engineers and scientists are also all middle class. The portraits reveal the emergence of the professions, at least for men. They also reveal that the aristocracy is still deeply embedded within traditional modes of exercising power, through military or naval forces.

In the founding of the National Portrait Gallery the authenticity of the portrait assumed great importance. Early statements about the intentions of the Gallery stress the importance of the 'authenticity' of the portraits. The meaning of 'authentic' is close to that of 'original', and indeed Stanhope had used the expression 'original portraits' in his initial presentation of the idea to the Commons in June 1852.⁶⁷ As Paul Barlow points out, the idea of 'authenticity' was a defining concept for the Gallery at its inception.⁶⁸ Some sense of the significance of the term can be gained from Thomas Carlyle's remarks to David Laing in 1854:

'in . . . Historical investigations it . . . is one of the most primary wants to procure a bodily likeness of the personage inquired after; a good *Portrait* if such exists; failing that, even an indifferent if sincere one. In short, *any*

representation made by a faithful human creature, of that Face and Figure, which *he* saw with his eyes, and which I can never see with mine, is now valuable to me, and much better than none at all.'⁶⁹

The emphasis in this statement from Carlyle is on the face-to-face encounter between the artist and the sitter. It is this direct link with the sitter that is valued. Portraits are 'authentic' if made directly from life.⁷⁰ The impression of the sitter, presented by a sincere person who has been able to produce an image gained from gazing directly at the eminent individual concerned, enables the present-day viewer of that impression to 'see through the artist's eyes', to share the space of semiosis, and thus to perceive the celebrated person unencumbered by the weight of the intervening years. The portrait itself as a material artefact once occupied the same historical space as the sitter which it represents, and it thereby acted in a metaphysical way to bring the sitter and the present-day viewer into an almost personal contact. This direct contact with the past was regarded as much more important than the quality of the work so produced – *any* representation would serve to make the connection. This tangible link with the individualised past was vital for the embryo National Portrait Gallery, which was to be understood as a museum of history. 'The claims of art', thundered *The Times*, two days after Stanhope's address to the House of Lords, would be postponed 'to the even higher purpose of collecting the authentic portraits of those who have in their several paths of eminence illustrated the history of their country.'⁷¹

Carlyle had emphasised how the fact that the portrait had been produced by a 'faithful human creature' who had actually looked into the face of the sitter, enabled a tangible link with the celebrated individual. But how many of the first 225 portraits were 'authentic'? If we take 'authentic' to mean 'having been produced in the presence of the sitter', then we can examine the names of the artists to see whether, and for how many works, this was the case.

Many of the portraits are by named artists, and these we might call 'original' portraits. Equally, many are 'from the studio of', 'after', or 'attributed to' specific artists; some are 'copies' or 'replicas'. These we might call 'non-original'. In order to understand this we need some insight into the political economy of the production of portraits. Some portraits were produced in a genuine face-to-face situation, although many of these will have been completed in the studio of the artist. These works are justifiably 'by' a named artist. Some artists ran large studio organisations, employing many assistants, some with particular expertise in the painting of hands, or drapery, for example. Portraits which seem close in stylistic terms to the work of a particular artist, but which lack the spark of the personal touch, or which merely resemble the overall 'look' of the work of a specific artist, are often called 'studio of . . .' 'Attributed to . . .' means that it is likely that the named artist painted the portrait, but not completely certain. 'After . . .' is a close copy, probably of an actual portrait, which has possibly been identified.

Very few, if any at all, of these 'non-original' portraits will have been painted in a face-to-face situation with the sitter. It is more likely that they will have been produced through copying an existing model, sometimes many years after the

model itself was produced. Not all of these models will themselves have been produced at a face-to-face sitting.

Over one-third of the first 225 portraits are found to be 'non-original'. In some of the categories, the proportions of 'non-originals' is very high: three-quarters of the portraits of royalty, for example, are 'studio of' or 'after', or from some other 'non-original' source. Half of the portraits of churchmen are 'non-originals', and so are nearly half of the portraits of public leaders. In the field of the arts, there is a high proportion (over three-quarters) of 'originals'. The quality is better here as many self-portraits were donated by artists or their families. In the small field of the sciences, the proportion of 'originals' is also high.

How are we to understand this? Why, when there has been such an emphasis on the 'authenticity' of the portrait, of the direct link back to the past and to the sitter him/herself, are so many portraits accepted that clearly do not offer the tangibility of this immediate link? The answer must lie in what these portraits do offer. They offer the opportunity to represent, to picture, to insert a particular subject into the space of history. They enable a more detailed picture, a more complete vision of the national past and the national memory. The portraits as a whole mark out a territory, they mobilise forces – the forces of the Church, and the forces of royalty, for example. They organise a domain of perception, a domain of visible history. They create a reliable, solidly material, core of value and emulation at the centre of a vast, diverse and dispersed empire.

The bulk of the non-original portraits are in three of the categories: three-quarters of the portraits in the 'royalty' category, over half the portraits in the 'Church' category, and just under a half of the portraits in the 'leadership' category. The structures of the portraits reveal an interesting game. The traditional power-elites, royalty and the Church, are mobilised, but so too is the new holder of power, the nation-state. The nation-state establishes itself as powerful, like the Church and the royal family. The state is the inheritor of these holders of power, who are, in this depiction of history, represented as its immediate ancestors. And such is the imperative to make these statements, to construct the master narrative of the history of the nation, that any potential blockage to their emergence, such as the unavailability of authentic portraits, is side-stepped by using any rendition that comes to hand.

The pedagogic lessons of the imag(in)ed nation

Those who took their place in the historical picture entered the national pantheon by virtue of their mental exertions or their noble conduct. These categories of distinction, applied to the sitters for the portraits that were acquired in the first ten years, describe the valued attributes of both the middle classes, whose eminence was achieved through their mental efforts, and the aristocracy, whose claim to fame was through the nobility of their families. The National Portrait Gallery was intended to display the social worth and historical standing of these heroes. But it was intended to do more. For those who were unable to act

intellectually or nobly, it would be enough to behave well, to be inspired to 'good conduct'. Those whose families were not noble, or who were not capable of high-minded moral actions, those whose intellect was not thought to be great – those, in fact who had no place in the picture-book of the national past – were expected to visit this space of emulation,⁷² gaze on the celebrated and eminent persons there enshrined, and learn to mind their manners.

Robert Young describes how an intrinsic enabling relation between education and culture operated in the constitution of the subject in the nineteenth century.⁷³ The National Portrait Gallery reproduced this relationship. The definition of education proposed by Durkheim expresses the objectives of the new cultural institution; education was understood as:

the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life. Its object is to arouse and to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states which are demanded of him by both the political society as a whole and the special milieu for which he is specifically destined . . . It follows from this that education consists of the methodical socialisation of the young generation.⁷⁴

Appropriate physical, intellectual and moral states will ensue if the museum succeeds in generating good conduct, mental exertion and noble actions. Durkheim describes society in the mid-nineteenth century as moving from 'punitive' to 'therapeutic' forms of control; Foucault refers to the 'disciplinary' society that, through establishing programmes, regimes and technologies of control, establishes individuals as their own self-regulators.⁷⁵ The National Portrait Gallery as a disciplined, therapeutic, and educational space aimed to exercise an influence through the picturing of the nation and its history on those 'that are not yet ready for social life'.

And who were they? Clearly, one category of the unready is that of young children, but in mid-nineteenth-century British society there were many categories of people who were regarded as having the characteristics of children. Evolutionary theory proposed that the European bourgeois was a member of a superior race, at a higher stage of human evolution, as distinct from the lower orders who remained in the historical and cultural equivalent of childhood or at most adolescence.⁷⁶ The bourgeois was, of course, the male bourgeois, whose assumed superiority in the political and cultural field rested to a large part on the imposed inferiority of his wife and children in the domestic field.⁷⁷ And the assumed superiority of the male bourgeois was propped up by a racist ideology that defined non-whites as 'beardless children whose life is a task and whose chief virtue consists in unquestioning obedience'.⁷⁸

In fact, everyone except white males from the middle and upper classes, those sectors of British society which were seen as cultured, were regarded as not quite fully developed and therefore not yet ready for social life.⁷⁹ These 'others' included women, the working classes, and members of the so-called 'primitive' races. The National Portrait Gallery represented one example of the many programmes that

were established to ensure that as far as possible, and for as long as possible, this was seen as 'natural'.

The National Portrait Gallery worked at several levels to invent and, through invention, to construct structures of power. These structures can be identified in relation to gender, class and race, geography and history.

In terms of gender, a very clear binary divide is made. Men and women are both represented in the history of eminence. But a clear binary divide emerges, by accident as it were. The categories for men are complex, multi-layered and active. Men occupy spaces of power, they deploy strategies of power through the processes of the law, of administration and governance, and the arts, the sciences and the Church. Women are represented as almost entirely contained within the family, and only worthy of note if that family is royal. The categories for women are fewer, much simpler, and the numbers represented are tiny. All but royal women are marginalised, and this is pictured very clearly.

In terms of class, the picture is not quite so clear. A hierarchy emerges, with the royal family at the top. But the relationship between the aristocracy and the middle class is complex and open. Power is held by both the traditional landed elite and the new progressive middle class, with the traditional rulers holding onto the repressive forces (the navy and the army), while the new rulers have appropriated the newer political, administrative and ideological structures of power. The power of inherited land is still strong, but newer economic structures are equally powerful. The lower classes are invisible, and are more marginalised than women in this representation of the national past.

In terms of geography, a centre of power and influence is established, where the fundamental patriarchal system still holds sway, in partnership with the new middle class administrative system. This London-based central power-base is supported at the local level by male landowners and chiefs of families, and by local male worthies (see Table 2.1). This is underpinned by the heads of religious and secular foundations who exert moral and social control. The complete power matrix acts to create a central nexus of power, supported within Britain at the local level and outside Britain by naval and military powers and by local colonial governors. The 200 million people ruled over by the British Empire at this time (one-quarter of the world's population)⁸⁰ are largely invisible, only occasionally glimpsed as servants and menials. They are *implied* in some of the portraits; a portrait of Captain Cook,⁸¹ for example, was acquired in 1858. But their presence is vitally important in its absence. British identity is defined in opposition to all those other races who inhabit the empire and the colonies. They constitute the margin that defines the centre. The construction of public history in museums, of which the National Portrait Gallery is merely one example, is one of the many strategies used to create white mythologies.⁸²

The analysis of the first 225 portraits has exposed a deployment of power that reveals clearly the strategies and tactics of power in mid-Victorian England. The picturing of this deployment is in itself extraordinary. However, what is even more extraordinary is that this image is constructed through a *historical* picturing. The

celebrated individuals that constructed the image were not contemporary with the institution – as we have seen, the rules of the Trustees expressly disallowed the acquisition of portraits of people who were still living.⁸³ In the first 225 portraits a picture of the structures of the deployment of mid-nineteenth-century power was constructed through an assemblage of portraits of historical individuals whose claim to fame could be used, converted, to support and underpin the contemporary modalities of power. In expressing contemporary individual positions of power in historical terms, not only was the past inscribed into the present but the past became the present in such a way as to legitimate entirely both the way the present was organised and the way the past had been selected. The present and the past effectively naturalised each other, and in doing so naturalised the silencing of the disruptive relations of gender, class and ethnicity.

The picturing of the power-relations of the present under the rubric of 'the history of the nation' can be understood as one of the strategies of the disciplinary museum, which enmeshes its subjects in systems of visibility and normalisation.⁸⁴ The National Portrait Gallery distributed portraits of celebrated individuals in space; it made visible, normal and morally correct, deep-seated relations of advantage and disadvantage. It presented a master narrative.

Viewing the nation's ancestors

By the end of the first decade of collecting, the raw materials for the construction of that master narrative were in place. If the three criteria for being seen as a nation were history, culture and domination,⁸⁵ the National Portrait Gallery could display them all, though only the first two of these would be overtly acknowledged. And this representation of those who apparently really belonged together naturally and about whom a consensus could be assumed, would be recognised as those who felt a part of it, who are 'part of us'.⁸⁶ The public rhetoric of the museum generated a productive matrix which defined the social and which made it available as an objective of and for action.⁸⁷

However, the presentation of the collection to the public was problematic. The collection of portraits had been slow, at a rate of about twenty-five works per year, and until 1896, for the first forty years of its existence, the collection was virtually itinerant, with a succession of temporary and inadequate homes. As a cultural institution, it barely held its own against the success of the Royal Academy and the museums complex at South Kensington.⁸⁸ As a public institution, attempting to use aristocratic techniques of display, the National Portrait Gallery was outclassed by the royal collection. In addition, there was still a strong feeling that the true place for the portrait was in the country house.⁸⁹ Although the government felt strongly about the power of art to civilise and to educate, it was reluctant to spend a great deal of money on this paternalistic aim. Subsidies for all the state-funded museums were inadequate,⁹⁰ and the National Portrait Gallery was never as generously funded as the National Gallery.⁹¹

Many of the portraits that were desirable were unavailable, as they were in the hands of people who were not prepared to donate them; portraits had to be picked

up as they became available.⁹² When portraits did come onto the market, they were frequently beyond the means of the Gallery. Many of the portraits available were not of the best aesthetic quality, and this is not surprising as the quality of the portraits was secondary to the eminence of the sitter. In an account of the Gallery and its collection in 1896, on the occasion of the opening of the new and permanent home of the building next to the National Gallery, one writer comments:

But anyone who expects that the National Portrait Gallery contains a selection of the best portraits by the best artists will be disappointed. In the first place its object is historical and not artistic, and in the second, there are no portraits to be found of some of the most eminent and interesting men and women. Moreover, when they exist, they are often unobtainable, for, however patriotic a man may be, he hesitates to part with the most cherished of his family possessions, and when they come onto the market they often fetch prices beyond the modest income of the Gallery.⁹³

By December 1857 the collections were installed at 29 Great George Street.⁹⁴ This was a domestic building with what was described as ‘two apartments of very moderate size, a very small back room on the same floor, and the walls of the staircase’.⁹⁵ The Trustees agreed that George Scharf, the first Secretary to the Trustees and Keeper of the National Portrait Gallery, should live over the shop, and he was allocated some of the upstairs rooms;⁹⁶ in 1860 he moved in his ‘elderlies’ – his mother and his aunt.⁹⁷ George Scharf was very active in investigating portraits for purchase by the Trustees,⁹⁸ visiting auction houses and picture collections and keeping a lively sketchbook of all that he saw where he noted down details of colour, condition, location, ownership and other relevant matters. He drew John Hayles’ portrait of Samuel Pepys in 1859, noted its location in 1863, and it was finally purchased in 1866⁹⁹ (see Figure 2.1).

In the list of Christmas 1866, Scharf lists the works and locations of works displayed at Great George Street: fifty-six works displayed on the staircase, seventy-three displayed in the front room, sixty-two in the boardroom and thirty-four in the back room.¹⁰⁰ By 1859 the museum was open to the public on Wednesdays and Saturdays to those who had obtained tickets in advance from major print-sellers.¹⁰¹ The Trustees’ reports of the first ten years give details of visitor numbers. These increased regularly over the period (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Visitor numbers for the first seven years of opening

Year	Visitors	Year	Visitors
1859	5,305	1863	10,475
1860	6,392	1864	14,885
1861	10,907	1865	16,642
1862	17,927		

Source: *Ninth Report of the Trustees*, 1866: 3



Figure 2.1 Samuel Pepys by John Hayles (NPG 211), sketched by George Scharf prior to recommending the purchase of the painting. Photo by courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

In addition the early reports give interesting details about some of the visitors. George Scharf states in the third Trustees report:

I have the honour to state that our Easter holidays have passed off in the most satisfactory manner. All the visitors were very orderly, and there was not one instance to be seen of any attempt to touch the pictures. The only danger was from an accidental push of an elbow from people crowding or in turning suddenly round. All very fortunately went off well.¹⁰²

Comments such as these appear in each of the reports of the period, in a somewhat repetitive and formulaic fashion. There is an obvious concern expressed about the behaviour of the visitors, and an underlying fear that violence will erupt. A reason is given for this fear when it is pointed out that the first three days of the Easter holidays are 'very frequently regarded as a period of holiday among the working classes'. Indeed 'many young lads and factory-boys were among the visitors', however, 'from first to last, everyone was quiet and well-behaved'.¹⁰³ 'There was a little crowd all day around the Chandos portrait,¹⁰⁴ but no attempt to touch it or any other objects in the gallery was either seen by myself or the constables in the gallery.'¹⁰⁵

The Trustees' reports express fear of indiscipline, and relief at the 'good conduct' that is observed. The galleries were clearly policed by both the Keeper and the constables ('police constables on duty' as they are referred to in a slightly later report¹⁰⁶), who were expecting and were prepared for trouble. Initially, tickets had been required in order to limit those who entered to those who were prepared to take the trouble to acquire a ticket, but very shortly after opening these were dispensed with over the Easter period.

The National Portrait Gallery was a site where good behaviour could be observed. The bodies, against expectation, were docile. But what of the minds? There are some comments on this too (although they are outweighed by the comments on behaviour). Scharf notes at Easter 1864:

I was surprised to find that the amount of ready knowledge which many of the visitors brought to bear on reading the names affixed to the pictures [*sic*]. Many of our visitors today were working men; very many were printers.¹⁰⁷

Many of the visitors this Easter were 'children, even charity children, and those belonging to the humblest classes'. In 1867:

Our Easter Monday visitors have behaved extremely well. Nothing could exceed their decorum, and the attention which they manifested towards the pictures themselves. They studied the printed lists, which were freely circulated gratuitously as before, and in several instances I ascertained that they had brought with them the lists which they had taken away the year before. It is gratifying to see the interest which parents take in pointing out to their children the great celebrities and the best characters of past times, and I was much pleased to observe the large proportion of intelligent lads, apparently from printing and large warehousing establishments.¹⁰⁸

The Trustees' reports are conscious of the roles accorded to museums at this period. They detail each year the events over the Easter period, and make clear how efficacious the Gallery is in producing good behaviour, and how the spaces act as emulative for those who might in other circumstances act in a more disruptive fashion. It is all deeply impressive, but it is the gaps in the narrative that suggest that matters might not be quite so rosy. The opening period over Easter was limited to three days. What happened during the rest of the year? It is only in a private letter that a different picture can be glimpsed. Writing to the Deputy Chairman of the Trustees on Good Friday evening, Scharf says:

this is a dull week – between the presence of the gentry and the presence of the snobs¹⁰⁹ (i.e. Easter week when the public will be let in without even a snip of a ticket) . . .¹¹⁰

During most of the year, it is the gentry who visit the Gallery.¹¹¹ Their presence causes no anxieties and arouses no fears; they are those who the Trustees would expect to visit. Nothing is recorded about them other than their numbers. And of course, they vastly outnumber the working people visiting during their leisure time over Easter. In 1860, when 6,392 people visited the Gallery over the period of the year, the visitor numbers over the Easter period were: 9 April (771), 10 April (440), 11 April (426)¹¹² – 1,637 in all. In 1863, total visitor figures were 10,475; figures for the Easter period were 1,592. The Easter visitors make up a substantial proportion of the annual return, but their presence offers more than mere numbers; they legitimate contemporary claims concerning the power of art and museums to civilise the lower classes. By the latter years of the nineteenth century, when these claims were heard far less frequently, these comments are no longer found in the reports. The Trustees are preoccupied with the business of running a museum, and this business is focused around the acquisition and lending of portraits. The responses of the visitors, and the identities of these visitors, are no longer of interest. They are reduced to an undifferentiated mass: by 1883, visitor numbers were as high as 146,187.¹¹³

During the first ten years, the collections were embryonic and their location uncertain. However, the pedagogic lessons that this new institution embodied were to stabilise and become more emphatic as the decades passed. They acted as the foundations on which the future development of the Gallery would be built. The attitudes to history, people and cultures that the early collections generated became to a large extent the 'common sense' that has structured much of British society throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1957 a former Director of the Gallery wrote:

Before one comes to assess a national face, one must have a clear realisation of the distinction between national and racial faces. Any Britisher owes the shape of his head to an ancestry, the elements of which include most of the known branches of the white race; the British nations are all of vividly mongrel stock.¹¹⁴

So deeply have these attitudes permeated, that this essay, republished without alteration in 1978, was again republished in a popular large glossy format in 1992.¹¹⁵

It is only in very recent years that these long-standing lessons are being reassessed and reappraised. At a time of radical cultural change, many of the institutions established by the nineteenth-century state have found themselves subject to re-evaluation. At the National Portrait Gallery, new displays (in the Twentieth century galleries, for example) use visually exciting exhibition techniques, and innovative ways of broadening the audience.¹¹⁶ Some temporary exhibitions, such as that on Ignatius Sancho, bring to visibility formerly hidden histories.¹¹⁷ However, the legacies of the past remain deeply rooted.

This case-study has shown how bringing objects together to form a group or make a series also constructs a social and cultural representation. This is of course particularly clear in the case of objects such as portraits, but the point is a more general one. In making decisions about which objects form series, and of all the potential objects within that class which are the significant ones, museum collections make statements about how the world and its peoples, histories and cultures are conceptualised. Relationships of equivalence are constructed, and are then made public through display. These visual statements, these constructed pictures, generate their own discourses and act to confirm the discourses with which they are affiliated. Where the founding collections are of long standing, the discourses so generated may well be subject to challenge today.

Speaking for herself? Hinemihī and her discourses

Groups of objects brought together in the form of a collection generate social and cultural statements. These statements are produced through the objects combined together in such a way that each individual object confirms the statement as a whole. Visual and material statements generated by grouped objects in museums combine to produce discourses which take their place within the broader social world. But can objects be placed in more than one position? Does the apparently inevitable unity and the assumed completeness of museum displays mask a more disordered state of affairs? Can objects be placed within a range of discourses where they may become part of diverse statements? How do objects become involved in the construction of identity and difference?

Seeing and knowing

It is an old but persistent museum fallacy that objects speak for themselves, and that the task of the curator is limited to presenting the object in as aesthetic, tasteful and ideologically neutral a fashion as possible for visitors to interpret the objects for themselves.¹ Objects are thought to 'communicate perfectly by being what they are'.² Behind this lies the idea that objects have a unified, stable, and unchanging meaning and natural positions which are self-evident within 'a universal view of man's achievement or knowledge'.³

Cultural theory, however, does not support this point of view, insisting rather that meanings are contingent upon the circumstances within which meanings are made. A deep connection exists between looking, seeing and knowing; perceptions are structured by knowledge – seeing and saying are limited by what can be thought. Foucault's 'gaze' – the look of the knowing subject⁴ – questions the distinction between the visible and the invisible, the said and the unsaid. Foucault suggests that these distinctions are not constant, but vary across time and space. The gaze works according to the epistemology that directs it, and as this epistemology modulates, inflects or ruptures, new alliances are forged between words and things.⁵ Knowledge directs the target of the gaze and makes visible aspects of things that otherwise remain invisible.⁶ Foucault further demonstrates how knowledge and power are coupled together. The wide-ranging semiotic