

### THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM IN 1983

It is now a century since General Pitt Rivers offered his collection to the University of Oxford. Although its acceptance was agreed in principle by Convocation in May 1883, the seal was not affixed until a year later. The Museum's centenary year, therefore, is 1984. The construction of a building to receive it, an Annexe to the University Museum, was begun in 1885, and it seems that the public was first admitted early in 1890. In accordance with the General's wishes E.B. Tylor was appointed to lecture on the subjects covered by the collection; the Museum, and the subsequently-established Department of Ethnology and Prehistory of which it forms part, can therefore claim to be the birth-place of academic anthropology in Britain.

It was also the General's wish that the collection should continue to be arranged in accordance with his own views and method, reflecting the approach he had developed over the preceding two decades during which he had been profoundly influential on the growth of ethnology and archaeology as subjects for serious study. For this reason the exhibitions are arranged, with minor exceptions, by a comparative or typological method. They illustrate, not whole cultures, but problems which have presented themselves to man from the earliest times and the solutions which man has devised: fishing and trapping, pottery manufacture, treatment of the dead, musical instruments, hafting of tools, surgery, to give some random examples. It is a logical consequence that except for industrial products, the collection covers the whole world and all periods: objects from prehistoric Europe or America, modern or recent material from outside Europe, and 'folk' items from Oxfordshire, can be seen side by side. The reserve collections are arranged on the same principle. This method raises some difficulties in providing a

service to research workers, who nowadays usually study a culture or a period rather than a technology, for a considerable search may be needed to assemble all the different categories of objects from one people or area. On the other hand the juxtapositions can be interesting and revealing, and for some visitors, such as musicologists or students of textile design, the method is ideal.

The Balfour Library covers all the subjects included in the collections or taught by the Department, and among its holdings are many works and periodicals not available elsewhere in Oxford. The full value of its rich photographic and documentary archives has been realized only in recent years as progress has been made with cataloguing, the early ethnographical photographs, going back to the middle of the 19th century, being especially important.

### *The Present Situation*

It is not always realized outside Oxford that the Museum forms part of a teaching department, and that the academic establishment includes lecturers who have no direct responsibility to the Museum and assistant curators whose duties do not include teaching (though all do so). Because of this unusual combination the teaching and the research interests of the academic staff incline towards a historical, environmental, technological and economic approach, with an awareness of the common ground between ethnology and prehistory. It is felt that the collections should not be merely a pool of research material - though this is an important part of their functions - but should be actively used in teaching at both undergraduate and graduate levels; and indeed this is so, for in addition to teaching for Diploma students and helping those working for research degrees, the Department provides instruction for undergraduate Geographers and Human Scientists. The curatorial staff now in post believe that not only should they be willing to teach, but that the research entailed and the 'feed-back' from students are of value in relation to their museum duties.

The Museum has an active collecting policy, a basic principle of which is that nothing offered which would be a valuable addition and is of a type not likely to be available in the future should be refused simply because of lack of space. The latter criterion applies to most ethnographical material. Of course a degree of realism is necessary; the offer of a canoe or a totem pole would have to be considered carefully, and in such cases another appropriate museum may be suggested. The preservation of material rapidly becoming obsolete, however, is a major duty of ethnographical museums. Real duplication is avoided, but apparent duplication can show the distribution of a

trait in time or space, and is then acceptable.

The Museum does not compete with local museums for archaeological or 'folk' material of local origin; nor does it normally compete with a national museum for material of importance lacking in the national collection. A valuable degree of co-operation exists between the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Museum of Mankind (London). Material is not accepted if there is doubt as to the legality of its original acquisition or export; but, especially in the case of items bought at auction or from dealers, this may be difficult to establish.

Cultural change is a proper study for a museum, both as a historical process of universal application and when accelerated by Western contacts. The recording of such change, for example the adaptation of traditional techniques to introduced materials, is a relevant museum subject, but collecting to illustrate it is 'open-ended' and, despite what has been said above, limitations of space and other resources have to be considered. Pieces made primarily for sale to Europeans and not reflecting indigenous values are not normally acquired.

At a time when the record price for a piece of ethnographical art (a Hawaiian wood sculpture) is £250,000, the Museum's very small purchase funds exclude it from competing in this field; but the Pitt Rivers is not an art museum. The General's insistence on collecting the ordinary and average as well as the exceptional is still a guiding principle. It is possible to buy, at auction or from dealers, reasonably-priced pieces which fill gaps in the collection. Private owners, too, are still a useful source, either by gift or by purchase. There are many, often now elderly, who have served in former colonial territories or who travelled before the days of mass tourism. However, the preferred method of collecting is by giving relatively small sums to graduates of this or other departments when they undertake research in the field. Their expenses are paid from other sources, so all of the Museum's contribution can be spent on collecting, and being trained in anthropology or archaeology they are able to provide the essential documentation. First-class collections, from South America, the Sudan, Kenya, New Guinea and Indonesia, have been obtained in this way during recent years.

The Museum has long been active in publication, with fifteen titles available in its Occasional Papers in Technology and Monograph series and several more at various stages of preparation. It recently published a booklet on the archive photograph collection, and sells postcards and guide leaflets.

The establishment of the academic museum staff is a curator and two-and-a-half assistant curators (one being a half-time lecturer). There are eight technicians, which may seem a large number until it is realized that they provide electrical and security services and carpentry for exhibitions and storage, do all display work and are responsible for the maintenance of the exhibited and the reserve collections. One is occupied full-time as photographer, working on public orders, teaching require-

ments and museum records. Another is the only full-time conservation officer, a ludicrously and dangerously inadequate provision for a collection of this size and importance, and is also in charge of the textile store. There are six attendants, who also have to clean the museum, offices and library. This is why the museum can be opened to the public only from 2.00 to 4.00 p.m. on week-days. With this level of staffing it is obviously impossible to provide expertise on all the subjects and areas covered by the collections. Every effort is made to meet the needs of research workers, but it is not always possible to locate and assemble all the pieces which they wish to see. Though the Museum's duty is primarily to the University, the staff are strongly aware of an obligation to the public and that the service offered is not adequate. Schools and other organized parties are admitted by arrangement during the mornings, but no guided tours, introductory talks or questionnaires are available. Specimens belonging to the public are identified and authenticated (but not valued) whenever possible, and advice is given on reading or on other sources of reference. It should be added that although the University museums provide what public services they can, and are a considerable tourist attraction, the local authority contributes nothing to them.

The Museum is at present split between four sites. The main building still houses all the displays, a large amount of reserve material, the Balfour Library, offices, workshops and lecture room. Across South Parks Road is the conservation laboratory, which also accommodates the textile store. Much of the archaeological material and some musical instruments are kept at 60, Banbury Road, which also houses the Donald Baden-Powell Quaternary Research Centre, a flourishing section of the Department's archaeological teaching and research activities. The main reserve store is in part of the Old Power House, a University property on the other side of the city. All these buildings are grossly overcrowded, and in none are the atmospheric conditions satisfactory, though considerable improvements have been achieved during the last two decades by *ad hoc* methods such as improving the heating systems and painting over the glass roof of the main building. The problems are not limited to the display and storage of specimens. Conditions for staff are unsatisfactory, and there is not adequate quiet working space for visitors or the Department's own students.

### *The Future*

The University's long-term plan is that the Museum and all its activities will eventually move to a new site at numbers 60 to 64, Banbury Road, new buildings being erected on the gardens

behind and the Victorian houses being retained for administrative use. The first stage of this project, financed by a bequest from Mr. Lewis Balfour, was completed structurally more than four years ago, but unfortunately serious problems of atmospheric control have made it impossible to move any specimens into the building. It has now been agreed that air-conditioning will be provided, and it is hoped that by the middle of 1983 it will be possible for work to commence on installing the new exhibitions.

The new building is too small to provide significant alleviation of the museum's space problems; that will have to await further development of the site. It will, however, make it possible to offer new exhibitions more modern in conception than anything which could be attempted in the old museum, and it will provide valuable experience before the main development proceeds.

The building divides into two unequal parts, forming about two-fifths and three-fifths of the display area. It is intended that the smaller part will illustrate the pre-agricultural way of life, with the main emphasis on Old World paleolithic cultures but including also some material from modern hunter-gatherer groups such as the Eskimo, the Bushmen and the Australian aborigines. The larger part will be given to musical instruments, and it is to this project that the Museum's resources will have to be mainly devoted.

Helene La Rue has written elsewhere on the Museum's musical instrument collection.<sup>1</sup> It will be enough to say here that it is perhaps, over-all, the best in the world, and is certainly among the two or three most important. The intention is not only to show instruments in typological series - though this will be an important element in the exhibitions - but to illustrate the ways in which musical sounds are produced and the social and ritual contexts of music, for example with masks and dance costumes. There will be listening points at which recordings can be heard, and audio-visual equipment will be used where appropriate. Since only a few museum specimens can be played by visitors, it is hoped to procure instruments of similar types for use by organised parties and to arrange recitals of exotic and of more familiar music.

To bring these plans to fruition will be beyond the present resources of the Museum. Funds will be needed not only to finance the exhibitions - to provide display materials, audio-visual equipment, photographs and other illustrative matter - but also for the salary of an assistant curator for the music collections, to care for them and to organize the exhibitions and the supporting activities for students and the public. The University has agreed that the Museum may raise funds for these purposes, mainly by approaches to industry and to organisations

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<sup>1</sup> See H. La Rue, "'The Natural History' of a Musical Instrument Collection", in B.A.L. Cranstone and S. Seidenberg (eds.), *The General's Gift: A Celebration of the Pitt Rivers Museum Centenary (1884-1984)*, Oxford: JASO 1983 (in press).

linked with the musical world, though gifts from individuals will of course be very welcome. Help in the form of equipment (by gift or loan) or of display materials will also be most valuable.

Its first century has seen the Museum grow into one of the most important in the world in its field, not only with regard to the size and scope of its collections but also their quality and documentation. If it seems to have lagged behind in display techniques and the services it provides, this is a result of starvation in space, staff and all other essential resources. Some recent re-arrangement of parts of the exhibition have shown what can be done even within the present severe limitations. Visitors often express a hope that it will not be changed radically. It certainly has charm and a unique atmosphere, but the staff are well aware of its deficiencies. At the beginning of its second century the Museum is poised to show what a museum can and should do in a field such as ethnomusicology, breaking out of the constraints of static display and actively involving its public and its students in obtaining the greatest possible value from its collections.

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