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Coming Home: Displaying and Describing the Trophies of Travels

Collections and displays

When Clarke arrived back in Cambridge, the university members finally saw the face that had already achieved celebrity status in the community. Not long after Clarke and Cripps had arrived in the English port, the *Cambridge Chronicle* happily reported that ‘The Lapland Travellers, Messrs. Cripps and Clarke, of Jesus College, are at length safely returned to this country.’¹ What had already safely arrived were the boxes that Clarke had shipped back to Cambridge from the European frontiers, his share totalling about 76 crates.²

Clarke and Cripps’s collections were noteworthy partly because of the number of specimens, and partly because they represented such distant and diverse parts of Europe. But the travellers were by no means unique for having collected during their journey. Museums at the national as well as private level were attracting public notice for the galaxy of gems, marbles, manuscripts and other curiosities that were being hoarded in Britain. The British Museum was fifty years old. By this time, the founding collection of ‘Books and Curiosities’ that were purchased through Acts of Parliament for nearly £20,000 from the estates of Sir Hans Sloane and Robert and Edward Harley had grown rapidly as a result of successive donations from individuals anxious to contribute to national prestige. The exponential growth in interest in the British Museum was due in large part to the activities of the Trustees appointed by King George II’s 1753 Museum Act. This governing body included the highest ranking officials in the British government, as well as the President of the Royal Society and the President of the Royal College of Physicians.³
For British ambassadors residing in foreign countries, the British Museum became a natural archive for a wide range of exotic and foreign specimens. The Elgin marbles contributed to an already famous history of collections housed in the nation’s museum. Sir William Hamilton, the Ambassador at Naples, achieved national distinction by selling Vesuvian mineral specimens and Greek vases to the Museum for around £8,000 in the 1790s. Such ambassadorial contributions to the nation’s museum became the model of conduct for British agents all over the British Empire. Likewise, the agents of the Secretary of State and the Admiralty now had a national vault in which to deposit their exotic payloads. These included curiosities collected on encounters with indigenous peoples during world-wide expeditions, such, for example, as were famously obtained during the voyages of Captain Cook between 1767 and 1779.

The growing scope of collecting by the British over distant lands was facilitated by the mobilisation of naval vessels and government funding. The result went beyond capturing curiosities peculiar to different populations, and extended to the discovery of natural historical specimens that helped define the classification of the kingdoms of nature. Previously unknown specimens – whether from the animal, plant or mineral kingdoms – occasionally presented new characteristics to the eyes of naturalists who refined their classification schemes of known species and specimens. The growing popularity of natural history stimulated searches on foreign shores in the hopes of bringing home new specimens. Naturalists across Europe paraded their treasures around. When Clarke returned from Europe and began to tell others about his collection of natural history specimens, he noted that ‘a fine mineral, as well as a fine picture, will often make the tour of Europe; and may be seen in London, Paris, and St Petersburg in the course of the same year.’ Likewise, in similar respect to a modern museum, possessing a rare mineral lent prestige to the owner of the cabinet in which it was displayed. In addition to reputation, foreign collections could also provide income; indeed, acquiring exotic curiosities afforded some the currency with which to recoup the expense of travelling. John Henry Heuland, who was part of an extended family of established London mineral dealers, travelled extensively throughout Europe during the first decade of the nineteenth century collecting minerals that supported his business for the rest of his life. A growing market for similar specimens in surrounding shops and touts’ tickets