

Preparing for A105: the growth of the British Museum and early collections

From Book 3, *Cultural Encounters*, Chapter 2 The art of Benin: changing relations between Europe and Africa II, p. 51.

The British Museum and the Benin ‘antiquities’

Well-known museums such as the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Natural History Museum emerged as world leaders in the collection, preservation and display of objects in the nineteenth century, in close competition with their German and French counterparts. The very ability of western culture to create such institutions was itself seen as an indicator of superiority over other cultures (Pointon, 1994, p. 3). The British Museum, first opened in 1759, soon became a forum for the exhibition of antiquities from around the world. The museum was organised into different departments which together told the story of the emergence of civilisation from prehistory.

In the nineteenth century, the growth of the British Museum corresponded with the rise in the study of **anthropology**¹ and **ethnography**² and their struggle for scientific recognition, and the relationship between the museum and the study of ethnography was strong. In 1886 the British Museum opened an ethnographic gallery to the public to house and display the many objects it had acquired from overseas. The publicity given to debates about evolution in the 1860s had raised the profile of both the Ethnological Society and the Anthropological Society. The two societies amalgamated in 1871 and founded the Anthropological Institute which had a close relationship with the ethnographers of the museum, Charles Hercules Read and Ormonde Maddock Dalton, both of whom worked hard to upgrade the status of ethnography at the museum. The character of the collection gradually changed to reflect the ‘scientific’ concerns of ethnographers and included objects and art from Africa ...

The display of spears, shields, pots and utensils was used to represent ideas about how so-called primitive races lived; artworks were seen somewhat differently as evidence of progress and civilisation. Although the British Museum was keen to acquire some of the artworks from Benin for the contribution they made to the history of humankind, fitting them in to the established theories of progress was not easy.

-
1. **anthropology** a branch of natural sciences concerned with the study of mankind through a close analysis of human society and through comparisons between cultures over time.
 2. **ethnography** a method of anthropology. The term is also used to refer to the end product of this study such as a text or a museum display. In the nineteenth century the term was often used to refer to the study of the thoughts and customs of societies through objects, artefacts and observation. Ethnographers studied objects and actions in the context of their purpose and function in forming comparative judgements on the nature of human societies.

