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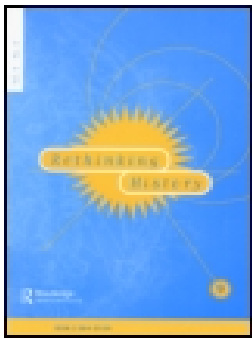
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# Reclaiming History in the British Museum Entranceway: Imperialism, Patronage and Female, Queer and Black Legacies

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## ABSTRACT

Today the British Museum (BM) entranceway consecrates imperialism and patronage. Undertaken as a journey, this paper reclaims its invisible female, queer and black legacies. In recent years there has been widespread acknowledgement that the BM needs to address its role in the British Empire. Yet, in the twenty-first century, the museum has shored up its imperial inheritance through its refurbished entranceway: the Weston Great Hall and Queen Elizabeth II Great Court. In these introductory chambers, imperialism provides the backdrop for the contemporary donors' names and exclusive corporate events. Here, museum heritage has become an arrow that signals progress through economic capital. I argue that the BM's reinforcement of its imperial legacy in the twenty-first century has come at the expense of other claims. Exploration of the historic entranceway shows it facilitated visitors' long-term engagement through artmaking on-site and the (now closed) Reading Room. Female, queer and black participants undertook creative, transgressive and political activities that led to social change. Anne Seymour Damer, Joel Augustus Rogers and Virginia Woolf developed practices that have particular significance for the museum. Reclaiming hidden female, queer and black legacies in the entranceway points to future inclusions. Importantly, these reclaimed histories are not quiet, counter moments pulled from the corners of the BM's vast estate; rather, they once took centre stage.

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## Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the British Museum (hereafter referred to as the BM) has turned its attention on itself through an overhaul of its introductory chambers: the Weston Great Hall and Queen Elizabeth II Great Court. Between 1997 and 2000, a major refurbishment of its

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entranceway was undertaken. The refurbishment is said to have brought back the past: the Weston Great Hall returned to how it looked when the museum opened and the Great Court's 'lost courtyard' found (British Museum 2001, 1–7). The BM represents its restorations as having exhumed museum history, but it has amplified its imperial inheritance at the expense of other pasts.

The BM's main entrance is a Greek Revival portico on Great Russell Street (Figure 1). It leads into the Weston Great Hall, which has been opened out to take visitors into the Great Court. In the court, four neoclassical porticoes support the state-of-the-art glass ceiling. Here, a sumptuous, decorative passage ends in a vast expanse of light. The architecture and ornamentation, pillars, porticoes and decor, recall the classical. The scale and stripped back design produce an austere and distanced aura. Roman embellishments orchestrate the whole towards



**Figure 1.** The Greek Revival portico on Great Russell Street. Drawing: Catherine Hahn 2021.

imperial power. Recent donors are memorialised on the walls accompanied by lavish corporate events. In the entranceway, the imperial realm is staged as the progenitor of late capitalism.

The narrative at the entrance is made convincing by the absence of other historic claims. The stories of prior female, queer and black inhabitants, including Anne Seymour Damer, Joel Augustus Rogers and Virginia Woolf, are not engaged. For more than a century, a statue of the sculptor Anne Damer (1749–1828) sat in the BM's entrance hall. It welcomed visitors into the museum and stood as a representation of a female and queer artist. Historically, the Reading Room library at the centre of the Great Court was associated with writers committed to social reform. The Reading Room library was moved in 1997. Activities that were once foregrounded across the entranceway, including art, writing and critical engagement, are no longer the norm. As a result, the museum's creative, collaborative and political heritage is no longer available for use.

The missing heritage reflects the fact that museums are 'designed to impart certain elements of the past – and, by definition, to forget others' (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004, 350). Nevertheless, it is imperative to interrogate the gaps in their heritage narratives, otherwise what they say about their past may be taken as the truth. Ludmilla Jordanova suggests visitors may recognise the artifice in museum reproduction to the extent that they do not believe 'a reconstruction really is its original'. Yet, they will 'place confidence' in the 'accuracy' of what they see, as authenticity is understood as the fundament of the museum (1989, 31).

The BM has changed the focus of its collection from fine art, natural history and literature to culture 'across the globe' (British Museum website homepage 2022)<sup>1</sup>. One can therefore anticipate that the museum's representation of its heritage will have also changed. However, there is a striking difference between the imperial heritage that the BM now represents as its past and its forgotten female, queer and black legacies.

This paper is set out as a journey through the two main entrance halls. We move from one space to the other and in between current-day practice and the past. Alternative histories to imperialism and patronage are identified and brought back into play.

The paper is written in the spirit of a site-specific *dérive*. Situationist International (SI) conceptualised the *dérive* as an unplanned walk that allows for unexpected possibilities and new encounters. Often undertaken in the company of others, it stimulates new thoughts. Rather than seeking an overview of the entrance, I have been led by the 'attractions of the terrain' and the specific figures who used it (Debord 1958, 62). In following their

journeys, I have embraced the idea of the museum as a living site. In her archi-textual study of Parliament, Nirmal Puwar reminds us that organised, ordered environments are also “lived”, as an interwoven series of local encounters, involving sensuous connections and imagination’ (2010, 299).

Drawing and sketching has brought intimacy to the *dérive*. Perched on the museum’s uncomfortable benches and folding chairs, with people rushing by, I experience the un-situated, liminal position of the contemporary visitor. Meanwhile, sketching from old photographs and pictures has taken me back to the historic site. My absorption in artmaking corresponds with the engrossed users of an earlier age and the active, bodily museum.

### ***The British Museum***

Before we begin the walk, I will offer a brief account of the museum’s imperial heritage<sup>2</sup>. During the British Empire, the BM embedded imperialism in its display strategy and design (Frost 2019, 489; Duthie 2011, 2). In the twenty-first century, financial support from private donors has reanimated and extended this legacy.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the BM accumulated a mass of antiquities from Greece and Rome, which it used to assert Britain’s ‘ownership of the classical past’ (Bradley 2010). The BM also gathered objects from the colonies, which it treated as Britain’s trophies (10; Giblin, Ramos, and Grout 2019, 480–81). In exhibiting plundered treasures, the BM replicated the Roman Empire’s assertion of power through the triumphal display (Duncan and Wallach 1980). It also created a myth of western ‘intellectual and technological superiority’, by representing the colonial exhibits as inferior to and less developed than ‘the high culture of classical antiquity’ (Bradley 2010, 7).

The BM’s neoclassical design and scale corroborated its imperial myth-making. The current building, designed by Robert Smirke, was completed in 1852 to replace Montague House. Built on the model of the Greek temple, its Portland stone façade conveyed the classical language of ‘beauty, decorum and rational form’ (Duncan 1995, 10). Its pediment conveyed the Enlightenment story of man’s progress. Simultaneously, the building’s stature, at over 300 feet in length with 44 ionic columns, manifested imperial power. In 1897, Smirke’s biographers described the building as ‘the most imposing in the metropolis’ (Caygill and Date 1999, 30). Inside the portico, the entranceway continued its classical theme: the front entrance hall recalled the Greek Revivalist style and the Reading Room signalled Rome. The *dérive* will show how alternative female, queer and

black discourses permeated these interior spaces. Yet, in the twenty-first century, the BM has revived its imperial inheritance.

Private capital has facilitated the imperial revival. The BM has always had donors. However, there has been an increase in privatisation since the 1980s, when the UK government decreased its funding for museums (Wu 2003; Jaffry and Apostolakis 2011, 50). Nowadays, day-to-day running costs struggle to attract funds, whilst private enterprise supports large building projects. According to Zan (2000), the BM's operating costs were reduced by almost a quarter in 1996–97 (222). At the same time, the refurbishment of the entranceway was undertaken at a cost of approximately £100 million pounds. Most of these funds came from private donors, including £30 million from the Garfield Weston Foundation ('The Great Court', British Museum website 2022)<sup>3</sup>. As part of this project, a new education facility and exhibition halls were built, but the main focus was on the spectacular entranceway.

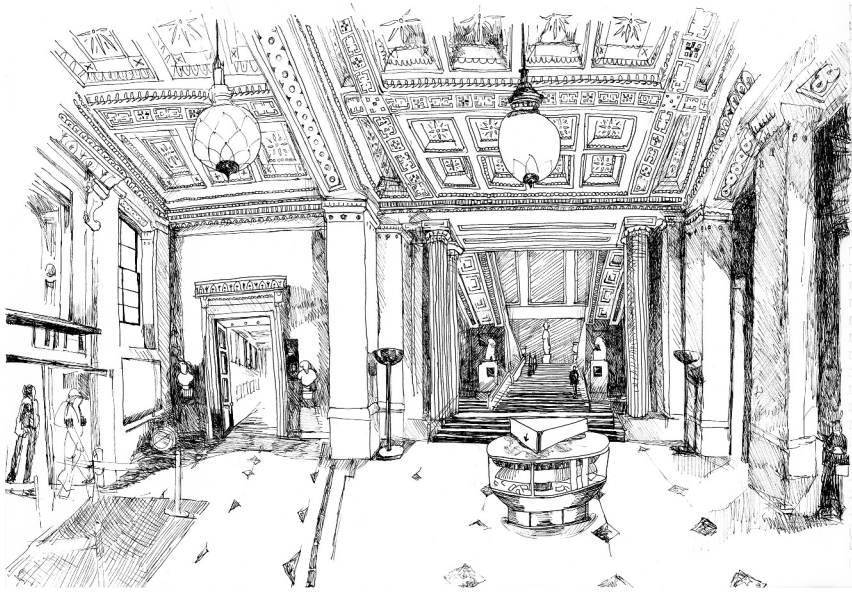
Frey and Meier (2011) identify a rise in funding for architectural developments in what they call 'superstar museums' (410). 'Stunning' architectural projects transform these sites from preservers of collections into total experiences (411). Thus, they suit donors who seek memorialisation as well as marketing and networking opportunities (Wu 2003).

The refurbished entranceway merges the imperial past with the new. The neoclassical architecture recalls the BM's persona as 'iconic model of a universal museum of the Enlightenment', whilst Rome conveys ideas of conquest, empire and triumphalism (Aronsson et al. 2011, 30). Adding the donors' names to the walls and hosting spectacular corporate events presents imperial heritage as the precursor to late capitalism. Importantly, there is no trace of the female, queer and black legacies that would offer alternative ways of understanding the museum.

## **The Weston Great Hall**

The *dérive* begins in the Weston Great Hall (Figure 2). Its original décor has been restored, but its content has been altered to generate new meanings. The current-day hall esteems its new patron, the Garfield Weston Foundation, along with ancient Greece and Rome. In contrast, the original 1847 entrance had a strong female and queer presence through the sculptor Anne Damer. In this section, we explore the hall today before returning to its transgressive nineteenth-century foundations.





**Figure 2.** The Weston Great Hall. Drawing: Catherine Hahn 2021.

In 2000, the entrance hall underwent restoration to return it to its original 1847 splendour, based on the Greek revivalist style. Its painted ceiling, an encaustic grid of green and pink pastel, contains blue panels adorned with large gold stars. The impression is of a medieval night sky viewed through a multitude of windows. The ceiling sits on 30 feet ionic columns that rise up from a clear expanse of York stone floor. The hall is mostly empty apart from four busts of Roman dignitaries, two on each side of the front door. In 2000, the hitherto unnamed entrance was given the grand sounding title The Weston Great Hall. What we sense in this space, though we do not see it, is the dust of museum history.

The BM's refurbishment suggests the room has always looked this way, but during the twentieth century, it was not so grand. Between the two World Wars, the hall was filled with sculptures and lined with dark wood panels and its ceiling ornamentation hidden beneath 'uniform pale' paint (Bowdler 1998, 3–4). The pedestrian aesthetic formed part of the great cover-up of museums during the interwar years, when architectural embellishment became associated with elitism and distraction (Barker and Thomas 1999, 88). The return of the majestic entrance in 2000 corresponds with the burgeoning interest in putting the museum on display (86). The restored glamour of the entranceway gives it the aura



of a masterpiece. Correspondingly, the Weston family name acts like a signature on the great work of art.

### ***The hall as capital***

Nowadays the BM's entrance performs as a branded gateway. The Weston family, owners of a business empire including Primark and Fortnum & Masons, made the refurbishment possible with a multi-million-pound donation through 'The Garfield Weston Foundation' (British Museum 2001, 7). The new title, The Weston Great Hall, is painted in gold on Georgian green on the wall to the direct left of the front entrance. The title is not ostentatiously large, but is positioned to be seen by visitors trained to look to the left of the door through the museum's historic alignment with the compass (Taylor 1999, 150). Although the museum has a long history of private patronage, the Westons' presence in the hitherto unnamed entrance indicates the encroachment of patronage into a previously untapped domain.

The Westons' decision to give their gift as a family has two key outcomes. Firstly, family members who come after will inherit the mantle of donor, making the hall a living memorial to their claim. Secondly, the family name blurs the ancestral connection with Garfield Weston who was described as Canada's leading investor in South Africa during apartheid (Legge, Pratt, Williams and Winsor 1970, 381). It thereby serves as image repair (Duncan 1995, 83). The family name in the fabric of the wall also historicises the Westons' presence. By giving the impression the Westons have always occupied the museum, and always will, the idea of a public institution recedes.

Along with the Westons' name, four busts of senior members of the imperial Roman family have been added to the hall. The choice of dignitaries, Emperors Pius, Severus and Pertinax and the Syrian regent Julia Mamaea, encompasses a range of ethnicities and geographic locations. They also include a female leader. As a result, the busts signify diversity whilst demonstrating the vast scope of Rome's colonial domain.<sup>4</sup>

Having imperial Roman administrators at the front door puts an emphasis on cultural overseers, rather than culture. Their presence stages Rome as the museum's forebear. As Rome made an art of displaying the heritage of those it conquered, a connection is also created between the BM's collection of 'the whole world', the triumphal display and the new patrons (Duncan and Wallach 1980; Wingfield et al. 2011, 135).

Next to the room title, the busts bind imperial Rome with the Westons' name. Significantly, the relationship between the patrons and Rome is hierarchical. The Westons' title is consecrated in gold whilst the busts of the emperors are accompanied by peeling cardboard labels. The Roman Britain Gallery was also renamed The Weston Gallery in 2017. These shifts indicate that the Roman cult of men as gods retains valency, but that power has transferred from the imperial realm to financial capital.

### *Unorthodox beginnings*

The present-day Weston Great Hall introduces the museum as a space in which one master western narrative has been superseded by another. This notion relies on the idea that the original entrance paid homage to Rome. The impression is misleading, as the hall initially celebrated ancient Greece and less orthodox history, in the shape of the sculptress Anne Damer (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Detail from the sculpture of Anne Damer. Drawing: Catherine Hahn 2022.

Nowadays, three giant archways take the audience directly from the entrance hall into the expansive Great Court, which means the entrance does not offer the depth of experience it did when it opened in 1847. Originally, the multi-coloured hall was a self-contained antechamber. Its solid back wall contained high windows and a small, closed door. A staircase on the left led visitors to the main display areas on the first floor. As a result of its design, the nineteenth-century hall served as an immersive sensorium.

The architects were permitted to use colour in the entrance on the basis that it replicated the scheme used in ancient Greece. Despite being endorsed by the classical tradition, the pastel décor would have appeared striking, or even vulgar, to nineteenth-century visitors as it challenged contemporary notions of good taste (Bowdler 1998, 2). In the 1840s, new reference points, such as Owen Jones' 'Details and Ornaments from the Alhambra' (1845), brought attention to colour in architecture, but polychrome continued to stoke fantasies of the feminine, oriental and immoral (Walker 2002, 47–48). The spherical hanging lamps would have added a warm yellow glow.

The flamboyant entrance was made relatable to the British audience through its content: a figurine of Anne Damer, Muse of Sculpture by Giuseppe Ceracchi (1778) and busts of William Shakespeare and Joseph Banks. Together, the sculptures symbolised the three main strands of the museum's collection: fine art, literature and biology. The popular appeal of well-known English personalities in this dramatic enclosure contrasts with the aloof power manifested through the patrons and imperial Rome today.

The sculpture of Damer took pride of place to the left of the entrance where the Westons' name now presides. The sculptures of Shakespeare and Banks were less conspicuously housed to the right of the door (Clarke 1847, vii–viii). A sketch made by Leonard Collman (1847) during the planning stage for the hall contains the sculpture of Damer, which suggests her presence was integral to its design (Walker 2002, 25). Her effigy remained in the entrance for more than 100 years welcoming visitors to the museum.

As museum host, Damer was an arresting choice. In the elite art world of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, sculpting was considered an unfitting career choice for women who were assumed to lack the requisite 'physical strength' (Clark 2008, 84). Ceracchi challenged this assumption through his portrayal of Damer as the sculptor in feminine form. In the Muse of Sculpture, she is presented as the classic beauty, with

coiffed hair and a high waisted dress, and as *the* sculptor with the tools of her trade: mallet, chisel and rasp, arranged by her feet. Her work apron is tucked over her skirt. What at first glance appears to be a baby in her arms is revealed, as the visitor walks by, to be a maquette of her sculpture the Genius of the Thames<sup>5</sup>. The depiction of Damer's artwork as a birth portends a new age of women sculptors and points towards her keystone masks of Thame and Isis (1785) on Henley Bridge (which represent the god and goddess of the river) (Noble 1908, 224). Damer's stature as the principal artist was reinforced by the size of the figurine. At 5 ft 9", her likeness towered over the average nineteenth-century visitor, the average British man at the time being approximately 5 ft 5".

### ***A queer host***

The BM's desire to associate itself with Damer speaks to nineteenth-century museum heterodoxy. Not just because she was a woman sculptor, but because she was widely thought to be a lesbian. There is no public discussion by Damer about her sexuality, and she was married to a man, John Damer, until he died in 1776. However, she cross-dressed, was a prominent member of Horace Walpole's homosocial Twickenham set and was the subject of four satires on sapphism (Gross 2014, 169, 278). During her lifetime, her public persona came to be so closely associated with homosexuality that the diarist Hester Thrale, discussing lesbian relationships, wrote 'tis a joke in London now to say such a one visits Mrs Damer' ([1795] as cited in O'Callaghan 2012, 134). Damer's reputation as the archetypal lesbian suggests her statue was an important point of contact for queer visitors to the museum. It would have continued to resonate with later visitors who recognised her portrayal. As Alison Oram recounts, seeing queer historic figures, or 'ghosts like us', in public sites encourages recognition, 'sexual resemblance' and a sense of 'sexual community' (2011, 192–193).

Damer's inhabitation of the entrance hall was made more remarkable because it connected to her sculptural practice, which manifested lesbian desire. Damer sculpted women who were thought to be her lovers, including the writer Mary Berry (Schmid 2012, 173). Her bas relief Antony and Cleopatra (1788) is also notable for its strong female sexual charge. The relief depicts Cleopatra moments before her death with her two female attendees, Iras and Charmion. Iras lies dying at the ruler's feet, whilst Charmion leans into Cleopatra from behind, her head on her shoulder and her hand on her wrist (see the

reproduction in Noble 1908, 82). The erotic triangle of female figures prefigures work on the same subject by nineteenth-century American sculptresses in Rome, through whom Cleopatra became a symbol of queer culture (Trafton 2004, 216).

Though not illegal in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, sexual relationships between women were commonly characterised as immoral and as a societal threat (Clark 2005; Denlinger 2005, xi). Damer's foregrounded presence in the entrance therefore countered prevailing social mores.

### ***Queer history today***

If we return to the BM today, there is little evidence of queer history in the museum's entranceway. However, staff have made links between objects in the collection and same-sex desire.

In 2007, Kate Smith created the first LGBTQ web-trail at the BM. The project expanded into Richard Parkinson's *A Little Gay History Book* (2013), which linked themes of same-sex desire to objects in the collection. Parkinson's book then became the inspiration for the exhibition *Desire, love, identity: exploring LGBTQ histories* (2017).

Though it offered a fresh perspective, *Desire, love, identity* was hampered by its location in the small atrium for the coin collection. The curators made the best of the limited space, by putting small items on display. These objects included Roman tokens (*spintriae*) that depicted men having sex and protest badges from rallies. It also showed contemporary artwork, such as Ōtsuka Takashi's playing cards of Japanese drag queens, *Drag Queen Deck* (1997). The chosen exhibits enabled the audience to map queer relationships between historic cultures and the political and global present. An accompanying 'Object Trail' in the wider museum turned the exhibition into a *dérive*.

*Desire, love, identity* marked a significant shift in queer representation at the BM. However, the exhibition was temporary and peripherally staged. Stuart Frost, Head of Interpretation, describes the 'many years' it can take to set up a permanent exhibition or gallery project at the BM. Impeded by the institution being large and hierarchical, planning and development involves 'countless stakeholders and complex sign-off processes' (2021, 81)<sup>6</sup>. Even in the case of the temporary exhibition, *Desire, love, identity*, it required Parkinson as a self-proclaimed 'accidental academic activist' to stage it<sup>7</sup>. Thus, *Desire, love, identity* performed more like an intervention than a day-to-day display. As a result, it

suggests *LGBTQ* culture sits outside regular museum practice, in contradistinction to the earlier museum when Damer played host.

### **Women artists**

When the statue of Damer was introduced to the museum, it spoke to a world of changing sexual rules. It also publicised the museum as a resource for female artists and a space being redefined by their acts. Like a craft guild emblem, Damer's presence in the entrance hall advertised art making on site.

Along with other women artists, Damer honed her craft at the BM. Martin Myrone identifies that between 1809 and 1917, 165 people applied to make art at the museum. Roughly 35% of them were women, these included Damer (2017, 21). Prior to 1900, life drawing classes for women were virtually unheard of in England due to the perceived impropriety of women being exposed to the nude (Clark 2008, 84). The BM thus advanced gender parity by giving women access to the human form through its statutory. The artists did not just sketch at the BM but painted and created sculptural models (Myrone 2017, 21). As a consequence, the museum acted like an informal artist's studio. Artist-visitors therefore had purchase within the museum in a way that is not available to visitors today, who move relatively quickly through.

### **Imperial interests**

As well as championing female art making, Damer used her art to promote herself and imperialism. Her investment in the imperial project complicates our understanding of Damer as an unorthodox presence in the museum.

As a well-known 'bluestocking' (a term used at the time for educated, intellectual women), Damer used her societal position to gain access to prominent figures and platforms for her work. For instance, she persuaded Lord Nelson to pose for her and then donated the sculpture to the City of London (Noble 1908, 150–61). In 1813, she secured her legacy at the BM by giving the museum her bust of Joseph Banks in velvety smooth bronze. Banks (who was also commemorated by a sculpture in the front entrance) was a famous botanist, colonial planner and BM trustee. His interwoven connection to the imperial project and museum is likely to have influenced the BM's decision to feature Damer's bust of him in a prestigious location at Montague House (the museum's first home).



From 1814 to 1828, Damer's sculpture of Banks was positioned to greet visitors on the landing of the Grand Staircase. The bust was surrounded by stuffed animals, including a rhinoceros and two giraffes, which called to mind Banks' role as imperial explorer (Caygill 2000, 27). In the company of these exotic animals, Damer ensured the bust maximum attention by having it installed on a rotating turntable (Dawson 1999, 32). Thus, the moving sculpture promoted Damer as an artist and endorsed the imperial project by representing Banks the coloniser with his eye on the world.

Damer was part of the English elite who used her representation of a senior imperialist to establish her space in the museum. Her presence at the BM therefore cannot be understood as evidence of unfettered public access. Nor can it be understood as antithetical to the imperialism portrayed through Rome in the hall today. What it does signify is the representation of a queer woman sculptor as the embodiment of the artistic norm. It also highlights the fact that the early museum fostered (female) creativity and helped change social conventions.

Damer's likeness now resides without fanfare in one of the Roman suites and her bust of Banks sits with other statues of men in the Enlightenment Gallery. Meanwhile, the patron and Roman busts in the front entrance project their authority onto a space that previously questioned social orthodoxy. The Westons have been rewarded for their funds with a permanent endorsement. Through its change in heritage, the museum moves from an expanding participatory realm to a provider of culture as capital.

## The Great Court

Moving back to the present day, three giant doorways lead visitors from the Weston Great Hall into the Queen Elizabeth II Great Court (Figure 4). The two-acre court opened in 2000. It contains shops, ticket-sale outlets, five works from the collection and multiple routes to the museum. Designed by Foster and Partners, most of the space is clear with a wide expanse of floor. The walls and floor are clad in cream stone. The ceiling is made from tessellated glass. The historic Reading Room occupies the centre. To its right, the 12m Kayung and 8m Nisga'a totem poles are pushed into insignificance by the court's epic scale. The court extends the homage to imperialism and patronage begun in the Weston Great Hall and lends it a masculine air.



**Figure 4.** Elizabeth II Great Court. Drawing: Catherine Hahn 2022.

In this section, we explore the Great Court’s role as donor memorial and its use as a backdrop for corporate events. We then return to its political past through the Reading Room.

### ***Formal and classical design***

The austere court summons the ‘inherent masculinity and authoritarian character of formalist aesthetics’ (Grunenberg 1994, 205). The idea that the court is a masculine realm is lent strength by its glass roof, which turns the sky into a moving picture. The court’s claim on the sky fits with Iwona Blazwick’s thesis that white museum interiors require monolithic artistic projects, as the only ones capable of competing with the space. The expansive view taps into the ‘rugged individualism’ of the frontier male: pioneer and adventurer (1993, 127).

Though the court conjures the freedom of the frontiersman, this abstract quality is not the public’s to own. Steve Rose writing in *The Guardian* when the court first opened describes how Foster’s epic projects reduce their visitors to ‘ant-like insignificance’ (2002). The huge vista gives the sense of being physically diminished. Richard J. Williams draws an analogy with the airport terminal, a liminal entity, that by

definition is ‘not a place in which people settle, but pass through’ (2004, 196). The vast interior reduces sound, making it difficult to hear. The shared benches are hard. The audience experiences the court as a distant, almost unwelcoming environment.

The sense of distance gains gravitas through dramatization of the court’s neoclassical features. Four Greek revivalist porticoes, one built for the refurbishment, have been redeployed as infrastructure for the state-of-the-art glass roof. The closed Reading Room, inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, has been clad in pale stone to make a feature of its huge, curved wall. The names of the donors who funded the Great Court refurbishment are carved on its surface. Their presence increases the distance between the public and museum.

### ***A tribute to capital***

Since their inception, museums have promoted patrons’ gifts. However, since the 1980s, and the Reagan and Thatcher era, there has been an increase in funding from companies and corporations (Wu 2003, 2). Wu notes that patrons generally seek to ‘wring as much publicity as possible from their act of “good will”’ (144). Consequently, patronage oscillates around famous museums and locations (Frey and Meier 2011, 410). At the BM, patronage concentrates on its most prestigious wall.

The Queen’s name is wrapped around the summit of the Reading Room. Below there are approximately 50 names of donors, including The Heritage National Lottery, families and companies.<sup>8</sup> Again, the Westons’ name is the first one sees, positioned in direct line of sight from the museum’s front door.

Adding the donors’ names to the Reading Room, based on the Pantheon, makes a direct connection between contemporary capital and Rome. Flanked by art and huge classical porticoes, the court evokes the Roman fora. The focus on the donors’ names corresponds with the deification of donors on memorials in Rome.

The governing class in the Roman Republic inscribed their names on the monuments and votive temples that they commissioned for deities (Miller 2013, 191). These memorials signalled that the donors valued the state, and its deities, above personal interests. At the same time, the donors and their families were glorified through their inscriptions. Indeed, the memorials gave a similar prestige to the donors as had previously been accorded to the gods (191–2). This means to prestige was so successful that by the late Republic inscriptions were focused on

the person who commissioned a temple, rather than on ‘the deity in whose honour the sanctuary was constructed’. The most notable example being Julius Caesar’s Forum Iulium, named after the emperor (192).

As well as conflating the BM’s donors with Roman dignitaries, the Reading Room wall pays homage to capital. Duncan describes how the museum as mausoleum performs as a surrogate-self for the donor, rewarding them with ‘something eternal’ (1995, 83). In the age of late capital, the BM donors have been ranked *ad infinitum* by the size of gift. The names of Major Supporters, Major Donors and Foundation Grants are relatively small and require visitors to crane their necks. The Westons’ name writ large stands alone. The correlation between the size of the donations and their commemoration makes money explicit in the claims.

The implications of buying wall space for memorialisation become clear when we compare the Reading Room wall with the symbolic structure of the war memorial. On war memorials, the names of those killed are frequently the same size, arranged in alphabetical order by regiment or battle to signify the equalising effect of death. Relatives trace names with fingers and on paper, so that the ‘marks of the dead . . . become treasured signatures of the living’ (Griswold 1992, 106). In the Great Court, the donors’ names form large, curved shadows on the wall. The soft lines draw one in, but the scale and grandeur do not encourage one to touch them. Rather, there is a gentle omnipresence. The visitor is positioned to pay deference to capital.

The role of money in the patrons’ claims is made explicit through the inclusion of multinationals. In the past, museums gave sanctuary to benefactors through an alchemy of disinterested investment that severed philanthropy from the financial market and its negative labour roots (Bourdieu 1996, 83, 141–149). This alchemy retains a trace in the elusive Weston family name. However, a shift in attitude is evident in the veneration of companies with names inseparable from their trade. These companies include asset managers Schrodgers and the oil and gas company BP. As a permanent corporate advertisement, the wall proclaims the largess of the BM’s investors and embraces marketisation. Retail outlets, built into the sides of the wall, compound the emphasis on trade and capital. The attention given to business is intrinsic to BM’s aims. One of the BM’s drivers for opening up the court has been to create ‘a superior platform for generating revenue’ (2014, 24).

### ***A corporate blank canvas***

Since the refurbishment, the museum's civic capacity has been eroded through private use. During public opening hours, the court is a vast, impenetrable whiteness. In the evening, it becomes a more hospitable environment for those who pay. The court, along with other areas of the museum, can be hired on a time allocated basis. Alongside other benefits, £35,000 buys exclusive entertainment access for three evenings a year ('Corporate Partnership', The British Museum website 2019). The extensive time allocated to corporate rental extends private possession of the museum.

The trend towards buying exclusive museum access in the late twentieth century reflects the reduction in government funds. Wu describes how museums at that time invited select sponsors, such as the Company Chairman and Chief Executives, to prestige events. Privileged access for the elite few produced a high society 'club' (2003, 140). Selectivity has since given way to spectacle. The BM's corporate sponsors now invite upwards of 800 guests to private evening functions ('Corporate Partnership', The British Museum website 2019). The shift from the CEO being invited into the museum in the late twentieth century to the Company acting as the host in the twenty-first evidences the rise in privatisation.

Nowadays sponsors can re-create the environment to their own specifications, giving them purchase over the museum. The vast expanse of the Great Court appears purpose built for such occasions. Indeed, event organisers characterise it as a 'magnificent blank canvas' on which companies are free to make their mark (Smart Group website 2019).

With awareness that corporations are buying experience as much as entry, spectacle comes fully into play in the BM entranceway. The event planner Moving Venue describes the 'absolute awe that is felt when the doors close to the public and set up begins' (2020). The BM furnishes corporations with a select list of planners and caterers to reinvent the space. For a cost, the Great Court can be turned into a meadow or an 'enchanted forest' with 10-foot trees ('British Museum', Event Concept website 2019). Jugglers and acrobats are available to descend from the glass ceiling ('Night at the Museum', Event Concept website 2019). Bespoke caterers convey guests to a 'bustling Moroccan market' or along the English coast (Rocket Food website 2019). Coloured lights, ambient music and comfortable chairs complete the scene. Here, the

convivial atmosphere encloses and enraptures, in contrast to the austere daytime court.

The fantastical events in the Great Court echo the immersive romance of the original entrance hall, but, with the corporation as host not the museum. The transformations wrought by the sponsors contain a clear message of takeover. The Reading Room is bathed in corporate logos and company achievements along with images that evoke change, such as red floating leaves ('Event spaces' British Museum website 2019). Event Concept, who facilitate events at the BM, use the strapline 'make it your own' (2019).

Along with the private events, sponsors have funded a few notable public ones. The most well known of these was the BP sponsored Days of the Dead Festival in 2015. With giant skeletons, circus performers, street food and tequila, it ran for four days and attracted more than 80,000 visitors (British Museum 2016, 2). This free event gave the public a similar experience to that of private visitors. At the same time, it extended the privileged position of the sponsors. In the wake of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, Days of the Dead gave BP extensive publicity and helped it solidify its relationship with Mexico (Artforum 11 May 2016).

Private corporate events create the illusion that guests are getting exclusive museum access. However, invitees at corporate spectacles do not have significantly more purchase than the public. Although they may experience a greater sense of belonging, their involvement is passive and time limited and therefore has little impact on the space. Rather, it is the patrons and corporate hosts who lay claim to the museum.

## The Reading Room

Returning to the nineteenth-century entrance hall, we find a very different atmosphere and sense of ownership at play. When the Reading Room opened as a library in 1857, it was the focal point of the museum (Figure 5). Readers entered it through a long wood-panelled tunnel from the front entrance hall. The central courtyard, now the Great Court, was the library's storehouse with three miles of books. The books were removed in 1997, and the Reading Room has remained closed since 2017<sup>9</sup>. A stone clad barrier now sits in front of its blocked door. Opening up the early library to the *dérive*, we find a mass of writers creating world-changing ideas.





**Figure 5.** The Reading Room. Drawing: Catherine Hahn 2020.

In 1757, the BM took on responsibility for housing the nation's books. A century later, the Reading Room opened under the leadership of its Principal Librarian, Antonio (Anthony) Panizzi. Panizzi arrived in Britain in 1823 as a political exile having been involved in the revolutionary struggle in Italy. Throughout his time in office, and for many years after, the library resonated with his interest in access and inquiry (Caygill 2000, 4).

Based on the Pantheon (home to the gods), the Reading Room was built on mammoth proportions. Newspapers boasted that it rivalled 'the great domes of classical antiquity' (Bradley 2010, 4). With a diameter of 140 feet and a height of 106 feet, it was larger than the dome of St Paul's Cathedral (Cuéllar 2019, 60–61). 38 desks radiated out of its centre like spokes on a wheel (British Museum 1924, 6). Decorated in azure, cream and gold and topped with 20 vaulted windows, the domed library, like the

front entrance hall, drew associations with the sky (Walford 1878). In this secular context, the architecture, borrowed from the church sacristy, did not evoke the heavens but the higher power of communal endeavour.

Panizzi contended that a ‘poor student’ in the library should have the ‘same means of indulging his curiosity’ as the ‘richest man in the kingdom’ (as quoted in Caygill 2000, 4). Aside from his assumption of a male reader, Panizzi’s vision was one of egalitarian inclusion. The round design and shared desks encouraged comradely pursuit and Panizzi refused to make space available for those who wanted to study alone. In his famous argument with the historian Thomas Carlyle, he wrote ‘I do not recall ever having stated that either you or anyone else could have a private room to study . . . ours is a *public* place’. Panizzi used the metaphor of a crowded railway carriage to make his point, a heterotopia where strangers met and mingled and took part in a common journey (Ashton 2012, 146). The pressure to share in the Reading Room provides a sharp contrast with the impersonal court and its corporate use today.

### ***A literary workshop***

By the late nineteenth century, Reading Room visitors were being offered an individuated streamlined service that promoted active participation. The room was not fully public, as it was only open to members. However, anyone doing research could apply to join. Membership was free and many people used the space for years (British Museum 1924, 7). Round-backed chairs, temperature controls, electric lamps and a pen, paper and inkstand at each table made writers feel at home (9–10). Unlike silent modern libraries, the companionable surroundings facilitated networking and chance encounters (Bernstein 2014, 1–5). Long after Panizzi left office in 1866, the room remained a hub of creative endeavour, evidenced by the introduction of a typing room in 1950 that enabled users to complete print-ready work (Goreau 1992).

As well as encouraging writing, the library provided unparalleled access to literature. It held most of the written material published in the British Isles and many thousands of books by international writers. The books included the most significant collection of Russian literature outside of Russia (Henderson 2017, 71). The library’s breadth contrasts with the bookshops in the Great Court today, which concentrate on the BM’s collection. In doing so, it points to the possibilities inherent in being able to borrow books, as opposed to buying them.

Described by museum staff as a literary workshop, the Reading Room provided a home from home for a wide array of scholars, novelists and political thinkers, including many committed to social reform (British Museum 1924, 6). Panizzi imagined it as ‘the centrepiece of a democratising nation’ (Bernstein 2014, 5). It was also the epicentre of the revolutionising world.

Lenin, Trotsky and Marx used the library and Robert Henderson identifies it was instrumental in the ‘Russian revolutionary movement as a whole’ (2017, 70). Leaders from broader social struggles were also attendees: Sylvia Pankhurst (women’s suffrage), Marcus Garvey (Pan-Africanism), Mahatma Gandhi (Indian independence), Sun Yat-Sen (first leader of the Republic of China) and Jomo Kenyatta (anti-colonialist and later Prime Minister of Kenya). These characters were joined by fiction writers engaged in social issues, including George Eliot, Oscar Wilde and George Orwell. Those who used it, invited others creating an extended network of attendees. Henderson describes how revolutionaries from across Europe served as each other’s membership referees (71). It was also, in Susan Bernstein’s words, a place where the ‘common herd’ congregated (2014, 136). Thus, it enabled the wider population to mix with well-known transnational thinkers to learn from each other and exchange ideas<sup>10</sup>.

### ***An imperial atmosphere***

Although the Reading Room inspired communality, it was pervaded by a British imperial atmosphere. During the colonial period, the BM acquired looted, plundered and fraudulently acquired objects (Duthie 2011, 15). As mentioned previously, it presented these as trophies (Giblin, Ramos, and Grout 2019, 480–81). By representing the objects in this way, the BM endorsed colonisation and ‘symbolically enacted the idea that London was the heart of the empire’ (Duthie 2011, 15–16). The library, with its ‘panoptical spatial logic’, helped ferment the idea of a Britain around which the rest of the world turned (Cuéllar 2019, 63).

The early twentieth-century BM also endorsed imperialism through written material that intimated subjugated people required guidance and control. For example, the 1904 British Museum Guidebook described objects in the ethnographic collection as products of the ‘primitive races of today’ in ‘stages of culture through which our own ancestors passed on their upward path’ (British Museum 1904, 104).

### ***Pan-African critique***

The early twentieth-century museum manifested British imperialism and racism. However, the Reading Room's occupants disrupt the notion that the historic BM was a wholly 'imperialist institution' (Duthie 2011, 2). During the early twentieth century, the three Jamaican-born scholars Marcus Garvey, Theophilus Scholes and Joel Augustus Rogers used the Reading Room. These writers shaped anti-colonial discourse from within its walls. Yet, their significant contribution to black centred philosophy is missing from the history that the entrance now enshrines. The refurbished entranceway has enhanced its imperial heritage, whilst occluding the writers' presence. The missing history is significant, as it shows the early twentieth-century Reading Room fostered anti-British imperial sentiment through key Pan-African figures.

In 1913, Garvey attended the BM to conduct research on Edward W. Blyden, the father of Pan-Africanism (1983, 27). While using the room, he published his vision for a future Caribbean Empire: 'The British West Indies in the Mirror of Civilisation, History Making by Colonial Negroes' ([1913] 1983). In his eulogised account, the federation of imperialism metamorphoses into a resource for thinking about black empowerment.

In Scholes' case, it was his missionary work in the Congo and Nigeria that led him to seek the eradication of British imperial rule. Having encountered the racist hypocrisy and injustice of British imperialism, he went on to use economic and legal evidence to expose differences in the British approach to governance at home and in the empire (see *Glimpses of the Ages*, 1905). Scholes also used his scholarship to reclaim an African past.

In 1925, Rogers met Scholes in the Reading Room, the two shared an interest in African history (Asukile 2010, 326). Their meeting reminds us that the Reading Room brought its inhabitants together in common cause. Rogers began his research looking for black success stories that would serve as inspiration for black youth ([1947] 1996, 24). From this starting place, an epic project emerged that presented Africa's ubiquitous position in world and western history (21).

Rogers is of particular significance in the history of the BM. His tactile encounters with material culture signal the importance of the library-museum. At the same time, his findings challenge the primitivizing taxonomy of the early twentieth-century display. As a self-taught academic, Rogers developed a mode of photographic research that brought

black heritage to the fore. He travelled to America, North Africa and Europe to photograph objects in museums. His consequent image analysis provided ‘non-verbal’ evidence of black creative practice and influence across cultures (Asukile 2010, 328). He also made astute conjectures where gaps in knowledge remained (Asukile 2006, 40). By bringing content from different sites together in imaginative and illuminating ways, he brought fragments of black cultural heritage back into play. At a time of exacerbated imperial harm, Rogers’ recuperations were restitutive.

Rogers turned his research into a cartoon series ‘Your History’ that ran for decades in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The cartoons placed ancient rulers, such as the Egyptian Pharaoh King Sahure, alongside current-day celebrities, such as the interpretive dancer Pearl Primus (23 March 1946). By merging ancient history with new, Rogers made cultural heritage popular, tangible and inspirational.

The actions of Garvey, Scholes and Rogers belied the BM’s imperial thrust and situated the museum as one facet of a wider, transnational, black resource.

### ***A revolutionary legacy***

At the BM today, there remains an interest in discussing histories in ways that blend past and present with political intent. In 2018, this interest was animated in *A Revolutionary Legacy: Haiti and Toussaint Louverture* in Room 3 and in *The Radical Residency* protest.

Room 3 is situated to the direct right of the entranceway, attached to the Weston Great Hall. At the threshold of the museum, the small room is easily overlooked. However, its exhibitions on ‘contemporary issues’ are important, as they are intended to guide the BM’s future direction and feed into the permanent displays (Chadwick 2019, 510). In 2018, Room 3 hosted *A Revolutionary Legacy*. A famous depiction of Louverture (1986), by the Harlem Renaissance artist Jacob Lawrence, was situated as the altarpiece. Lawrence, like Rogers, undertook research as the basis for his image and text-based chronicles. His silkscreen print transmitted his desire to recall black figures from history. The exhibition’s colour scheme in black and yellow deliberately signalled Black Lives Matter, bringing contemporary relevance to its theme (505–506).

Although the exhibition was very small and only showed for three months, it made broader connections (McIntosh 2018). On the BM website, Charles Forsdick explores Lubaina Himid’s treatment of

Louverture. In doing so, Himid's art practice, racism in the UK and gender representation are brought into the discussion ('Visualising Toussaint Louverture', The British Museum website 2022). Marlene L. Daut considers the gap in Haitian scholarship and what this would offer in terms of living Haitian history and 'archiving black sovereignty' (2019). At the same time, the curator, Esther Chadwick, considers the show in relation to decolonising the BM and The Radical Residency (2019). The Radical Residency was initiated by queer women of colour, who, at the time of the exhibition, were occupying a BM property in Montague Street. Their protest was about the BM, which they described as a 'warehouse of plundered goods', and about the growing marketization of education (520). The group explored these issues through non-hierarchical workshops and activities.

It is notable that the curator of *A Revolutionary Legacy* positions her discourse in relation to The Radical Residency, a non-authorised museum activity. Intersectional dialogue across museum space provides a productive forum for raising questions about what, and who, needs to be included in the museum (519). Situated at the borders of practice, or illegitimate, the wider discourse also speaks to the current-day disjuncture between the transitory and the permanent in the BM. These events reiterate that at present black diasporic and queer stories are not being told in an embedded way from inside the museum, though they are active at its margins.

### *Female claims*

Moving back to the nineteenth century, we find female contestation of museum patriarchy in the Reading Room. Here, we see women changing the space from the inside through their actions.

Virginia Woolf's famous depiction of the Reading Room as a 'huge bald forehead' summoned its status as the omnipotent male ([1929] 2004, 30). Like the Great Court, it appeared masculine in scale. The names of 19 famous male writers, added below its dome in 1907, reinforced its masculine aura. This environment could be assumed to have alienated its female readers. Yet, the women who used the library challenged its patriarchal norms and those of wider society.

Many women who used the library became pathbreakers in male dominated careers. Yet, the names on the wall do not reflect this. For example, the social researcher Beatrice Potter Webb, who used the room for over 30 years. In 1886 Potter Webb worked on Charles Booth's inquiry, the *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1892-



97), (Bhullar 2016). She then co-founded and taught at the London School of Economics, which opened in 1895 and accepted women from the start. A further example is Cornelia Sorabji, who joined the Reading Room in 1914. She became the first woman lawyer in India and the first woman trained in law at Oxford. Sorabji made a career out of raising issues on women's right in India, in particular those of the *purdahnashins*, who lived segregated lives from men (Mossman 2004, 54) <sup>11</sup>. It should be pointed out that both women held political opinions that raise questions about their pursuits for equality. Sorabji supported the British Raj and was against women's suffrage, whilst later in life Potter Webb was enthusiastic about Stalin's Russia (Burton 1998, 111). Nevertheless, their presence demonstrates the Reading Room offered opportunities to women, as well as accommodating different opinions and tensions.

### *Seating arrangements*

One constraint women had to overcome in the Reading Room was its gendered structuring, which initially complied with patriarchal norms. Women gained access to the Reading Room in 1850, at the same time as men. But, they were characterised in newspaper articles as a dangerous disorder, unruly intrusion and sexual distraction (Hoberman 2002, 497–502; Bernstein 2014, 5–6). Their perceived threat to male hegemony is evidenced by attempts to corral them in women-only seats. That most women chose not to sit in the reserved female section of the library is noteworthy in late nineteenth-century Britain. At the time, gender mixing in public was considered a 'promiscuous' act (Cowtan 1872, 224; Bernstein 2014, 5). The women's cohabitation of the Reading Room might therefore be thought of as a sexual, as well as social, rebellion.

The power of their promiscuous seat swapping is brought home by Eleanor Marx who met her lover Edward Aveling whilst working in the library. The two went on to write 'The Woman Question: From a Socialist Point of View' (1886). In the text, they rail against the 'serfdom' of marriage. A union that they represent as 'worse than prostitution' due to the unequal status it accorded women. Marx and Aveling's relationship was fraught with contradictions (not least that Aveling married somebody else). Nonetheless, Marx's refusal to take up an expected female position, in her work, private life or in the library, embodied the capacity of Reading Room women to live beyond repressive sexual norms. It also

suggests that women could use the library to enact social change as a consequence of the changes they produced in the room.

### **Productive rage**

While women made inroads into the Reading Room, through taking up seats in male dominated areas, they expressed significant anger about the library's content and their access to it. In 1888 Marx was described as having 'fairly danced in anger' when she was informed women could not access the Kama Sutra (quoted in First and Scott 1980, 136). For Woolf, the frustration stemmed from the fact that almost all of the books in the library were written by men, including those about women ([1929] 2004, 30). Woolf's response is worth looking at in some detail, as, in common with Rogers, it led to the development of a novel methodology. *A Room of One's Own* ([1929] 2004) emerged from Woolf's anger, as the first significant work of feminist literary criticism – and a counter to the concept of the male literary expert.

Much of the inspiration for Woolf's text derived directly from the library. Susan Bernstein, who has written extensively about women in the Reading Room, considers its hundreds of readers 'made a pivotal difference' in Woolf's work (2014, 180–181). Where Rogers was motivated by possibilities in the museum collection, Woolf was stimulated by anger at its male content and readers.

In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf, in the guise of her character Mary, contrasts being denied entry to an Oxford college library, 'never will I wake those echoes, never will I ask for that hospitality again', with her experience of the BM 'factory' as a generator of productive rage ([1929] 2004, 8, 30). Here, Woolf makes an important distinction between Oxford, which she views as inherently impenetrable, and the BM, which she frames as a masculine workplace in need of change.

Positioning Mary in the Reading Room, Woolf compares her heroine's heuristic approach to writing with that of a male reader who sits at the adjoining desk. The male reader has been trained 'at Oxbridge' to read books systematically, extract 'nuggets' and label his findings 'with an A or a B or a C'. Mary, who finds his method wanting, picks up books by men about women almost randomly from the piles, reads, rages and scribbles (33–37). Mary's anger is directed at the male literary canon and the assumed rights its authors claim over women. Her rage takes over her body: 'My heart had leapt. My cheek had burnt. I had flushed with anger'. Her wrath coalesces in drawings, which beginning with an image of the

eponymous male author pile up on top of each other until there is nothing to be seen but ‘a faggot burning on the top of Hampstead Heath’ (37).

Through her writing and imagery, Woolf attacks the male literary canon and the gendered norms of the library. Although she suggests her character Mary feels oppressed and forced to conform, it is Mary who holds the power: who bears down on her mark and who, in expressing her creative passion, generates the spark for Woolf’s feminist creed. Significantly, the Reading Room takes Woolf from anger to the image-idea. In doing so, the room becomes the birthplace of the feminist literary canon. Woolf’s use of visual methods chimes with Rogers’ use of photography and Damer’s drawing in the museum. For each of these creators, museum content provides the catalyst for their work.

### **Afterlife**

Woolf uses her literary study to argue for a room of one’s own; however, I concur with Bernstein who maintains the power of Woolf’s text resides in her relationship with the museum. As Bernstein shows, the BM stimulated new, creative ‘trajectories’ for women writers, including Woolf, through the exposure it gave them to other users, both living and deceased (2014, 21). Woolf writes:

Masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. (Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* [1929] 2004, 76)

It is significant that the nearest thing to the Reading Room’s praxis today, is probably unauthorised demonstrations in the Great Court. Most notably, those against the museum’s sponsorship by the oil and gas company BP. BP or not BP? stage lively, theatrical protests including hundreds of participants, chanting and banners. Wearing black t-shirts and acting on mass, they co-opt the museum for their actions (BP or not BP? website). Like the Reading Room occupants and The Radical Residency protest, their practice responds to the environment. For example, in *Striking Back at the Empire*, they make connections between BP, objects in the collection and colonisation (14<sup>th</sup> August 2021). BP or not BP? also joined with London Mexico Solidarity to take over the stage at the BP sponsored Days of the Dead Festival (2015). Most current practices authorised by the museum lack a commensurate collaborative and critical aura.

Other protests also feel less situated. BP or Not BP?'s actions in the Great Court have become so widely publicised, that they feel normalised. Consequently, they challenge the atmosphere of deference.

Following on from the Reading Room's closure in 2017, the BM announced plans for it to reopen within the next 10 years. The museum plans to use it to 'display objects from the permanent collection' as a 'general introduction to the museum' (Brown 2017). The emphasis on objects should provide a more inclusive context for the museum than the patron-centred court. However, it is unlikely to revive the Reading Room's politically charged, participatory use.

## Conclusion

There is an urgent and incumbent need for the BM to address its imperial heritage of 'looting, economic exploitation and racism' and de-imperialise its space (Giblin, Ramos, and Grout 2019, 480–81). Concomitantly, the museum would benefit from acknowledging past practices that were more inclusive than those today. Reinstating its generative, political, transgressive heritage would interfere with its narrative of imperialism and neo-capitalism. Using pertinent past practices could also provide the means to undo its inequalities.

Damer, Rogers and Woolf's creative output reveals the benefit of close involvement with the museum across time. It was a space in which the public could create and debate, meet strangers and political allies and connect with objects (and each other) in ways beyond those established by the museum. For example, Rogers bringing work by black makers together in new illuminating ways. The discourse that emanated from the early museum illustrates the benefits of an accessible environment where users can raise issues of public concern and find solutions together.

## Notes

1. In 1881, the mineralogical, botanical and geological collections moved to the Natural History Museum. In 1824, the European and British paintings moved to the National Gallery. In 1997, the nation's books moved to the British Library (Caygill and Date 1999, 52, 73). The BM now represents itself as wanting to be a 'collection of the world for the world' and presents its collection as 'representative of world cultures' (British Museum 2006, 6).
2. The focus of this essay on the entranceway means the permanent collection and display is beyond its scope. There are numerous discussions on how the

history of imperialism has continued to reverberate in these spaces, including Frost (2019), Kiwara-Wilson (1970), Duthie (2011) and Coombes (1997).

3. The Millennium Commission also gave £30 million with further funds from the Heritage Lottery ('The Great Court', British Museum website).
4. In the late noughties, Julius Caesar's bust sat where Pius' does now – Caesar is known as the conqueror and dictator, whilst Pius, as one of the Five Good Emperors, has more benevolent associations.
5. The British Museum website. Accessed 9 February 2023. [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_OA-10540](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_OA-10540).
6. Frost suggests the COVID-19 pandemic has sped up some decision-making and activities at the BM, in particular related to digital technology (Frost 2021, 81).
7. A Great Unrecorded History: LGBT Heritage and World Cultures. University of Oxford Podcasts. 2016. <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/great-unrecorded-history-lgbt-heritage-and-world-cultures>
8. The names include BP and Raymond and Beverly Sackler, which have faced calls for their removal from BP or nor BP? and PAIN (Prescription, Addiction, Intervention Now), respectively. In 2022, the BM agreed to remove the Sackler family name from its display galleries, but it has not removed their name from the wall.
9. In 1997, the books were moved to the British Library. Between 2000 and 2007, the Reading Room housed the Paul Hamlyn Gallery with books on the museum collection. From 2007, it was re-purposed for pay-for-view exhibitions. These included *The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army* (2007), which recorded the second largest visitor numbers in the BM's history.
10. The current-day museum continues to provide learning opportunities, but these are mediated and skewed towards private use. In contrast to the self-motivated learning in the Reading Room, most information is packaged as lectures, events, tours, resources and activities. The BP and Stevenson Lecture Theatres are named after their sponsors and available for hire accompanied by branding opportunities, a VIP area and tours of the museum ('Commercial hire', The British Museum website 2022).
11. The Reading Room register shows Sorabji became a member of the Reading Room on the 11 August 1914 (Accessed 14/01/23).

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