

The British Museum

by Neil MacGregor

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In 2003 the British Museum celebrated the 250th anniversary of its foundation. We spent a great deal of time thinking about the role that a great encyclopaedic museum of the Enlightenment, the first national museum in the world, can and should play today.

> Parliament created the British Museum in 1753 to be held in trust for the world and to be open to all free of charge, ensuring the right of all citizens to information about the world.

> For many, the icon of the British Museum is the Rosetta Stone, the key to the decipherment of the writing and language of ancient Egypt. I want to propose an object from another part of Africa which also reveals complex and unexpected relationships between cultures and across continents. It is a chair, pieced together from fragments of guns: butts and barrels turned into a throne. The sculpture is made from weapons decommissioned in Mozambique after the amnesty that ended the Civil War in 1992, by the artist Kester, as part of the project "Transforming Arms into Plough Shares".

> It is a profoundly disconcerting object. Resonances will certainly disturb anybody who has lived through conflict. As for

the rest of us, as we look more closely at the weapons, we realise that we are looking at guns made in Britain, in Europe, in the United States. We confront the fact that we were all complicit in this civil war and that this monument to the history of Africa involves the societies from which we all come.

> It is, I believe, an object that achieves the fundamental purpose

for which the British Museum was set up, and for which it still exists today: to allow visitors to address through the filter of history, both ancient and more recent, key questions of contemporary politics and international relations, to assess and consider their place in the world and to see the different parts of that world as indissolubly linked. For good or ill, we are all interconnected.

> The museum was founded to promote reasoned understanding, by allowing cultures to be compared. One of the greatest threats to human dignity and freedom worldwide must surely be the reductive identity that governments and media everywhere seek to pin on diverse and complicated cultures and societies. To borrow from the late cultural historian Edward Said, what we need is a community of humanist interpretation into one another's cultures, that enables us to avoid sound-bite answers and to insist on the complexity of the underlying questions. World museums of this kind offer us a chance to forge the arguments that can hope to defeat the simplifying brutalities of politics all round the world. The British Museum is now, as 250 years ago, a collection with a worldwide civic purpose. Where else other than in these museums can the world see so clearly that it is one?

The State Hermitage Museum

Over the two and a half centuries of its existence, the State Hermitage Museum has assembled collections comprising over 3,000,000 items, which present the development of world art and culture from the Stone Age to the 20th century. Today, the museum is one of the largest in the world.

> The State Hermitage Museum originated with the purchase in 1764 by the Empress Catherine the Great of 225 paintings from the Prussian king Frederick II. These paintings were mainly from the Dutch and Flemish schools. The collection was housed in two pavilions, now called the Small Hermitage and the Old Hermitage, which were built in the 1760s and 1770s in the Classical Style, as additions to the official imperial residence, the Winter Palace with its splendid Baroque façade. In 1783, the collection of Count Baudouin, comprising 119 first-class paintings of the Dutch, Flemish and French schools, was purchased in Paris. This tradition of collecting works of art later became part of state policy. Sculpture, jewelry, medals, archaeological artefacts, scientific instruments, mosaics and other artworks were purchased over the years, making the Hermitage State Museum into a truly universal museum of art and culture. In 1852, the New Hermitage was the first Russian State museum to open its doors to the public.

> A recent initiative of the State Hermitage Museum is the Digital Collection. This is the first stage of a project that aims to digitise the Hermitage's entire collection, so that everyone may enjoy its treasures on the Web, wherever they are in the world. Advanced technology allows the collections to be searched according to a wide range of criteria: the artwork can be identified by artist, title, subject, or by certain attributes such as style, genre, theme, region or date. Artworks can be viewed from multiple perspectives, and those with similar characteristics can be called up and displayed. Hence the State Hermitage Museum is working on ensuring universal access to information about the museum and its history, and to the treasures it contains.