

reconstructing the museum of the london missionary society

rosemary seton

The London Missionary Society (LMS) was not the only British missionary society to assemble collections of heathen images, curios, artifacts, and natural history specimens brought back by missionaries or contributed by supporters and well-wishers. The Church Missionary Society and the Methodist Missionary Society, for example, had fair-sized displays of such objects at their respective offices. But it was the Missionary Museum of the London Missionary Society, based for most of its life in Blomfield Street, Finsbury, which became a well-known feature on the tourist map of London as well as a popular attraction for LMS supporters from the provinces and their families. Later on, ethnographers and other scholars keen to see its famed Polynesian collections were not infrequent visitors.

The museum first came into existence in 1814 to house the curios and natural history specimens sent or brought to England by missionaries or friends of the mission. The *Evangelical Magazine* announced in October 1814 that:

the Directors of the Missionary Society have taken, and entered upon, a set of Rooms in the *Old Jewry*, near *Cheapside*; being the second story [sic] of that spacious building ... and formerly the residence of the Lord Mayors of the City. These Rooms, nine in number, are well adapted to their intended purposes; some being very spacious, and capable of accommodating large Committees; others are appropriated to the use of the Secretaries, for a Library, &c., some for the reception of those curiosities which have been transmitted from Otaheite, China, South America, and particularly from South Africa. These will be prepared for public inspection as soon as possible. (*Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, October 1814: 405)¹

Rosemary Seton is Research Associate, Department of the Study of Religions, SOAS, and formerly Head of Archives and Special Collections at SOAS.

By April 1815 the Missionary Museum was “open for the inspection of the members and friends of the Society, on *Tuesdays* and *Thursdays* only, from eleven in the forenoon until three in the afternoon” (*Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, April 1815: 171), and in 1816 it was reported that the Revd Mr Thom had sent from South Africa “skins of a large lion, tyger, leopard, ant-eater, wild boar, lynx, gnoo, spring buck, kangaroo, etc.; together with various kinds of serpents,—the puff-adder, the camelion, and La Masitè (commonly called *The Hottentot’s God*)” (*Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, September 1816: 361). Arrangements were made for these items to be stuffed by the London taxidermist, Benjamin Leadbeater, before being put on display (LMS Board Minutes, August 12, 1816: 85).

Pride of place in the museum was taken by the heathen images discarded by the Christianized inhabitants of the Polynesian islands visited by LMS missionaries from 1797 onwards. Prominently displayed among these were the family gods of the king of Tahiti who, as early as 1816, had indicated his wish that these “idols be sent to Britane ... for the inspection of the people of Europe, that they may satisfy their curiosity and know Tahiti’s foolish gods” (*Transactions of the Missionary Society*, 1816: 431–2). There were also several idols from Raiatea and Rurutu (the rest having been destroyed), which had been shipped to London by the LMS missionary John Williams. One of these, to which Williams referred as “Aa, the national God of Rurutu,” attracted particular attention, on account of its singular appearance: “in addition to his being bedecked with little gods outside, a door was discovered at his back; on opening which, he was found to be full of small gods; and no less than twenty-four were taken out, one after the other” (Williams 1837: 44–5) (Figure 1). One showcase was devoted to images of Indian deities such as Shivu Lingu “the Destroyer, has three Eyes, rides on a Bull, his Eyes inflamed with intoxicating herbs” and who, the catalog noted, bore “a strong resemblance to Bacchus” (LMS Museum 1826: 24). All were described in great detail in the printed catalog, which emphasized the “horrible”



FIG 1
 Carved wooden figure known as A'a, presented to John Williams by Rurutu islanders in 1821.
 Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum.

they win, we hung the rejected idols of Aitutaki to the yard-arms and other parts of the vessel, entered the harbour in triumph, sailed down to the settlement, and dropped anchor amidst the shouts and congratulations of our people” (Williams 1837: 107–8).

A plentiful array of handmade artifacts from Polynesia, India, China, Africa and Madagascar—baskets and calabashes and cooking utensils, musical instruments, bread pounders, adzes and axes, fish hooks, textiles, a cloak made from the entrails of animals, as well as weapons of all kinds could also be found in the museum. The preface to the catalog explained that these should be seen not only as “efforts ... of natural genius, especially in countries rude and uncivilised, [and as] another class of interesting curiosities” but also as proving “how capable even the most uncivilised of mankind are of receiving that instruction which it is the study of the Missionaries to communicate” (LMS Museum 1826: iii).

In studying the contents of the museum as described in the catalog and looking at the earliest illustration of the interior of the museum, depicted in the *Illustrated London News* of May 20, 1843 (Figure 2), one is struck by the quantity and variety of the preserved and stuffed natural history exhibits. Those in charge of the formation of the Missionary Museum were evidently influenced by the Universalist ideas then in vogue where institutions such as the British Museum had a collecting policy which reflected “Enlightenment curiosity in all aspects of the material world” (Sloan 2004: 6). More importantly, it gave the society opportunities to display many of God’s creatures, especially those with biblical connotations, which its visitors would have small chance of otherwise seeing. The founding of the Missionary Museum predated the London Zoo at Regent’s Park by some fourteen years. The Missionary Museum might not have been able to accommodate a stuffed elephant but in the center of the museum room stood a giraffe, or camelopard, which had been shot in the Griqua Country, South Africa by LMS Director John Campbell in July 1814. The catalog explained that “this very peculiar animal inhabits the interior parts of Africa and the forests of Ethiopia” and, in a classical note, added that it “was known to the Romans in early times.” In the far case can be seen a zebra, an “elegant quadruped” inhabiting “the plains of Africa” possibly the

aspects of the figures or their attributes. The museum even contained a statue of the Virgin Mary and child belonging to two former Roman Catholic converts in Mysore who had now “embraced the Christian religion, and sent the same to the Missionary Society” (LMS Museum 1826: 31). The presence of these “trophies of Christianity” proclaimed the victorious nature of successful Protestant missionary activity in almost militaristic terms. In his *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Seas Islands*, John Williams described how he felt “as other warriors feel a pride in displaying trophies of the victories



FIG 2

The LMS Museum in 1843. Photo: *Illustrated London News*, May 25, 1843: 342. © The British Library Board.

“wild ass” referred to In Job 39:5—“Who hath sent forth the wild ass?” One of the animals, shot by Campbell, a huge rhinoceros, proved too large to convey, only a portion of its head and tusk (some three feet long) was placed on display. The catalog describes this object as a unicorn or rhinoceros and quoted another text from the same chapter in Job: “Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee or abide by thy crib?” In addition to these large mammals could be seen butterflies and moths, a praying mantis, a branch of a “stop-a-while” tree which had greatly impeded John Campbell’s party in South Africa and scorpions and centipedes.

Visitors to the Museum

No record of who visited the museum has survived, but the museum appears to have become a very popular attraction in the 1840s and 1850s and not just for LMS supporters from the provinces “wont to repair,” after the meetings in anniversary week each May, to “revive their sympathies by an actual inspection of those idol gods which it is the first aim of the society utterly to abolish” (*Illustrated London News*, May 20, 1843). The museum featured in all the major guidebooks of the period, including *Dickens Dictionary of London* and John

Timbs’s *Curiosities of London*. An 1859 article in the *Illustrated London News* pronounced the museum less cluttered and the displays better arranged with all the objects labeled. As can be seen from the illustration (Figure 3), most of the natural history exhibits had been removed and manmade objects given greater prominence. The article also revealed a change in the way such items were being seen. The Polynesian exhibits in particular were now viewed as art objects: “curious



FIG 3

The LMS Museum in 1859. Photo: *Illustrated London News*, June 25, 1859: 605. © The British Library Board.

examples of the dawn and progress of art.” Some were “simply logs of wood” and others “bunches of feathers” while “some of the carved work on paddles etc., by the savage inhabitants of the South Sea Islands” was “in some instances, remarkable for both design and execution” (*Illustrated London News*, June 25, 1859).

By the 1870s and 1880s the collections had become well known to European and other scholars, particularly archaeologists and ethnographers. During the late 1880s the keeper of the British Museum’s Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography, Augustus Wollaston Franks, began a campaign to persuade LMS directors that they should transfer to the safekeeping of the British Museum “the most important and valuable section of the interesting museum” and particularly those objects collected by “Ellis, Williams, Tyerman, Bennet and others during their residence among the islands of the Eastern Pacific.” LMS directors eventually agreed to transfer them on loan on the “understanding that every article so lent be distinctly labeled as lent by the LMS” (LMS Board Minutes, February 10, 1890). In this way, the LMS Pacific collections, about 230 objects, joined those articles donated by Captain Cook in the British Museum’s South Sea Room. The Missionary Museum at Blomfield Street continued for a few more years despite having lost its most significant exhibits. In March 1910, LMS directors took the decision to “discontinue the museum and sell its contents for the benefit of the Society.” The Board concluded that the main object of the museum now appeared to be “sentiment to the past.” It was “rarely visited” whereas in the past it had been popular and full of “interesting and inspiring novelties” (LMS Board Minutes, March 15, 1910). Museum staff visited again and made another selection, also advising on sale prices for the remainder of the articles. A number of these went either then or eventually to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. Not all the objects were dispersed. A careful selection of articles connected closely with the history of the society was made and kept for use as loans or in missionary exhibitions.

Conclusion

The initial impulse behind the museum appears to have been to enable supporters of the mission to visualize the remote corners

of the world—its flora, fauna, mineral, animal, and human life—in which their missionaries were operating. With the receipt of Pomare of Tahiti’s household gods in or around 1818 the museum’s main purpose shifted to becoming a repository for those trophies of Christianity, the discarded symbols of tribal and animist beliefs in the South Seas, later joined by idols from Africa, India, and China. The museum had an important role in publicizing and stimulating interest in the work of the mission. The uniqueness of the museum’s perceived role was spelt out in 1860 to the readers of the *Juvenile Missionary Magazine*:

Now this museum is altogether different from every other museum in the world. It is a not a mere collection of curious, or beautiful, or valuable things ... [Its] chief purpose ... is to show what men are without the Gospel. (*Juvenile Missionary Magazine of the London Missionary Society*, 1860: 12)

However, the museum appears also to have been widely appreciated as a collection of the “curious, the beautiful and the valuable” and in particular for the artistic and scholarly value of its Polynesian wooden sculptures and carvings. These have continued to captivate twentieth-century artists such as Henry Moore and even inspired William Empson to compose his famous poem about the “supreme god in the ethnological section,” a poem displayed on the London Underground in celebration of the museum’s 250th anniversary in 2003. One notes the irony, however, that those objects which the British Museum prevailed on the LMS directors to transfer all those years ago are no longer on display in the museum’s galleries except during temporary exhibitions.

notes and references

¹ The LMS, now the Council for World Mission (CWM), was founded as the Missionary Society in 1795. The society pioneered Protestant missionary work in China, the Pacific, South Africa, and Madagascar and also worked in South and South East Asia, Central Africa and the Caribbean. The archive and library have been on deposit in the Library of the School of Oriental and Studies, University of London since 1973.

² The most comprehensive recent exhibition, featuring about forty items formerly in the LMS Museum, was jointly organized by the Museum and the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia in 2006–07. An exhibition catalog, *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia 1760–1860*, is available from the museum.

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