



Romanticism on the Net

Museum

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Abstract

Nominally addressed to the “museum,” this essay delineates its broad features in the Romantic period, a time of remarkable experimentation and growth, while exploring the adjacent possibilities of a digital “museum” such as *RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition)*. Recovering the imaginative and eclectic model of the early modern curiosity cabinet, a form of gathering and containment for the notable and the contingent that actively engages the beholder in making connections, I approach the museum less as a fixed place or structure than as a scene of action (or related actions) that bears closely on Romanticism and its materialities, particularly in the realm of memory, mobility, interiority, temporality, and presence. The museum, in this way, is what it *does*, or what it enables us to do, as we organize, frame, and document (as well as overlook, misappropriate, and forget) the ever-rising tide of material things that marked the turn of the nineteenth century. From paintings to travelling cases, reliquaries to trees, folding screens to books, writers’ chairs to locks of hair, *RÊVE*’s exhibits perform or repeat the museum’s essential gestures by assembling and mediating objects for our considered inspection, while making space for things to form associations, to re-member, to move—and in turn, to move us.

Biographical Note

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1. In a letter to a periodical aptly called *The Museum, or, The Literary and Historical Register*, and indeed addressed more specifically to its “keeper,” Mark Akenside, Horace Walpole proposes: “The Notion I have of a *Museum*, is an Hospital for every Thing that is *singular*; whether the Thing have acquired Singularity, from having escaped the Rage of Time; from

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any natural Oddness in itself, or from being so insignificant, that nobody ever thought it worth their while to produce any more of the same Sort” (*Museum* 46–47). Walpole was himself a collector of objects that, as they filled his villa, Strawberry Hill, at Twickenham, were prized for their own unusual and non-indicative qualities. Although his remarks are somewhat tongue-in-cheek (he was writing, under a pseudonym, to propose “[a] scheme for raising a large sum of money for the use of the Government by laying a tax on message cards and notes” [46]), they still encourage us to register the extent to which the things we find in a museum might be radically unrelated, apart from their coexistence inside this entity called a “museum”—itself a “thing” subject to construction, and to profound historical variability. In their collective sheltering, the museum’s things are also subject to “remediation” in at least one sense of the word, as the term “hospital” might suggest.¹

2. The Romantic period is a fascinating moment of experimentation in the activities of museum making, with numerous museums and exhibitions competing for the attention (and custom) of the curious public. Guidebooks for visitors to London, for instance, in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries list a plethora of options, including Ashton Lever’s “Holophusikon,” the European Museum, Richard Du Bourg’s museum of cork models, John Hunter’s anatomical preparations, the armouries of the Tower of London or the Oplotheca, Merlin’s Mechanical Museum, William Bullock’s London Museum or “Egyptian Hall,” various picture galleries (both public and private), and of course the British Museum, alongside more sensational displays of waxworks, the menagerie at Exeter Change, and exhibitions in such venues as the Great Room at Spring Gardens (formerly the home of Cox’s Museum of automata). The scope and variety of these

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offerings speak to the eclectic tastes of a public bent on amusement (possibly instructive, certainly entertaining), and to the lively and competitive nature of Georgian exhibition culture; they also point to the fluid nature of the “museum” as a term and a physical place, both very much in formation at this time.²

3. Even though it is somewhat commonplace to see the museum as it takes shape in the later eighteenth century as increasingly informed by rational, Enlightenment principles—by the urge to catalogue and classify—it nevertheless retains the spirit of discovery, even play, that was present in previous models of gathering and holding, such as the curiosity cabinet of the early modern era, which assembled a diverse array of unusual, unique, and/or magnificent objects. Louis Marin, for example, regards the cabinet of curiosities as devoted to a “hedonism of knowledge, a *jouissance* of information born of surprise, of wonder, or from a fascination that is nearly always *ponctuel*, nearly always singular”—while the museum comes to reflect the “rationalized illustration of the encyclopaedia” (14, 16; my trans.). In part, this is because *Wunderkammern* were notoriously heterogeneous, bringing objects into conversation with each other in accordance with scientific and conceptual models that now seem inherently disorderly, if not quaint. Nevertheless, as sites for study (whether for knowledge or pleasure) that depend on principles of selection and arrangement that are responsive to latent correspondences in and among things—that inscribe things “within a special setting which would instill in them layers of meaning” (Mauriès 25)—curiosity cabinets navigate the problem of containment and presentation that is shared by the museum, in whatever form it may take. As a space of gathering in the spirit of that “Museon” of old (meeting place of the muses, and a point of convergence,

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thereafter, for the work of philosophy and the arts), all museums are sites of (provisional) containment and display—even if, for our purposes, with a “Romantic” attention to the fugitive, the forgotten, and their importance to the collective fabric of things.

4. While we tend to think of a museum as a physical space to house or store physical objects, the expansion of digital archives and gathering places, not least those created by museums themselves, asks us to reconsider. Could an entity such as *RÊVE*, the inspiration and framework for the essays in this volume, be called a museum in this expanded sense, and what can it tell us about how we define and develop a “museum”? Moreover, can the model of the curiosity cabinet, with its porous borderlines and inherent plurality, be of any help as we think this through? Bearing in mind the diverse and indeed contingent nature of the objects that *RÊVE* assembles, makes co-present, and invites us to encounter in pathways of our choosing, it is not a stretch to see that such a virtual exhibition platform can perform similar functions.³ It picks up on exactly those aspects of the curiosity cabinet that Barbara Stafford and Francis Terpak proposed, some twenty years ago (in their *Devices of Wonder* exhibition at the Getty and its accompanying catalogue), were like contemporary systems of information in the digital age—making the cabinet an early form of interdisciplinarity that “offers a parallel to the interlocking dynamics of the contemporary universe” (2–3).⁴
5. Because it scales up, in a potentially limitless and transcendent way, the associative power of things, along with the many arguably “Romantic” impulses that shape the museum in the first place, a digital container could well be the most Romantic museum of all. Referencing a variety of *RÊVE* exhibits, this essay will advance six propositions about the

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museum and its relationship to Romantic materiality by transposing it to the register of a verb: by seeing it as a site of action (indeed, of a set of interrelated actions) profoundly connected to the central tropes and preoccupations of Romanticism as we generally understand it—engaging questions of representation, mobility, experience, memory, history, temporality, and presence.

The Museum: Brings the Outside In

6. Krzysztof Pomian's general definition of a collection as "a set of natural or artificial objects, kept temporarily or permanently out of the economic circuit of a collection, afforded special protection in enclosed spaces adapted specifically for that purpose and put on display" (9), also captures our common understanding of what a museum is and does (it links the distinctive worlds of the private collection and the public museum in ways that will be helpful here). To begin with the idea that a museum is a container is to recognize that it is a framing device, defining and constraining the things it holds. It is, in this way, *a view*, or as Svetlana Alpers has put it, a "way of seeing" (27). Alpers draws our attention to the way items brought together in early modern cabinets were valued for their visual power and interest and to how, by "isolating something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking," museum exhibits give rise to what she calls "the museum effect" (26). While certain types of objects lend themselves better to this than others, "everything in a museum is put under the pressure of a way of seeing"; and whether the mode of display is serial or thematic, "certain parameters of visual interest" are invariably established, consciously or otherwise (29). Evidently, both cabinets and museums rely on the

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associative nature of looking to sort and assimilate their contents into a coherent scopic-conceptual regime. The museum, however, offers perspectives in quite literal ways, with its interiors and exhibition spaces laid out in accordance with familiar aesthetic tropes borrowed from the picturesque tour and, in particular, the prospect view.

7. "[A View of Abbotsford from across the Tweed](#)" offers us a view of Walter Scott's house-museum, Abbotsford, a view that Kirsty Archer-Thompson, in an exhibit for *RÊVE*, suggests "reads like a picturesque painting by numbers." Intriguingly, however, the painting predates the existence of what it documents, promoting Scott's larger (but still incomplete) project, offering a foretaste of how Scott's imaginative vision, driven by his interest in the material and literary remains of Scotland's cultural heritage, might take material shape, and function as a suitable "container" for his ever-growing collections of antiquities, armour and weaponry, historical artifacts, curiosities, and books. As Archer-Thompson stresses, "pleasing prospect," which was used by contemporary commentators to describe Elizabeth Terry's 1822 painting, "could not be a more apt phrase," freighted as it is "with both spatial and a temporal meaning for a painting that looks so overtly to the future prospects of a place." The term "prospect" is multivalent, meaning in the first instance "the view (of a landscape, etc.) afforded by a particular location or position; a vista; an extensive or commanding range of sight," and more generally, "a spectacle, sight, or scene" ("Prospect," def. 1.1b, def. 1.3a). Metaphorically, it refers to the action of looking forward or seeing into a distance, as in "a mental picture or vista, esp. of something future or expected," thereby making room for imaginative possibilities, for things to come—and carrying us, in literary terms, from the prospect poem to the prospectus ("Prospect," def.

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2.6). The clever framing of a landscape (or prospect) view in Terry’s painting extends or invites us to envisage the spaces of the house-museum interior as they will become. Intriguingly, in museums of the Romantic period, the encounter with collected objects, and the creative approach to their display, involves with striking frequency the evocation of metaphorical and indeed “virtual” prospects. For example, the arrangement of the displays on the main floor of Lever’s popular museum in Leicester Square was rapturously described, in *The European Magazine* in 1782, in precisely such terms: “Nothing can have a finer effect than the richness of this view at first entrance. The length of the prospect, the variety of the objects, and the beauty of the colours, give sensations of surprize and delight, that must be felt before they can be conceived” (17).

8. The importance of landscape as a model for the museum is closely connected to the experience of travel, and in particular, the picturesque tour. The objects that came to be contained in museums were almost invariably those encountered and collected in the context of travel; and travel gave rise to experiences that were formulated in terms of the prospect, quite often as a way of sorting the immensity of nature into comprehensible patterns and forms.⁵ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has observed that “the passion for close visual observation on the spot had transformed how landscapes were experienced and described during the eighteenth century and shaped how specimens brought into galleries were exhibited, to the point that the experience of travel became the model for exhibitions about other places” (404). The impact of travel is also metaphorical—as much poetic as practical (or literary as well as literal). The house-museum of the architect [Sir John Soane](#), in which his eclectic collections are still imaginatively displayed in a maze-like succession

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of spaces, punctuated and multiplied by mirrors, windows, and viewpoints, explicitly interiorizes visual effects widely sought in the popular discourse of landscape viewing. As Susan Feinberg Millenson points out, “in its visual complexity and emotional variety, Soane’s house-museum evokes the eighteenth-century landscape garden circuit” (109). Accounts of visitors convey the experience of ever-changing vistas, which, like a successfully contrived picturesque landscape, also surprise and delight.

9. The museum thus leads us from the exterior to the interior, effectively remediating and reframing the outdoors. At the same time, it turns the inside out, addressing an audience beyond its doors through the re-mediations of print and visual culture. While Terry’s painting captures the exterior of Scott’s house (as it were, distantly), the genre of the interior view poses both challenges and possibilities for museums. Archer-Thompson writes of the painting as a “two-dimensional prototype for a three-dimensional phenomenon” (referencing also the mobile and apparently boundless reach of Scott’s—and Abbotsford’s—fame); the same is true of attempts to conceptualize and represent museum spaces visually in two-dimensional media such as prints and paintings. To return to the example of Lever’s Holophusikon, we know something of how it might have looked from an [interior view](#) of the upper level painted by Sarah Stone in 1786.⁶ Stone offers viewers a picturesque sweep of the display rooms and their contents, extending in dizzying succession beyond the theatrically curtained viewpoint of the landing. Images such as these, which capture and “frame” their interiors (often in idealized or aspirational ways) helpfully document the display strategies and visual idioms referenced by collectors and curators in the arrangement of museum objects and spaces.

The Museum: Is (a) Mindful

10. This play on the museum as an entity that situates the embodied eye in a landscape of things, offering a space to be framed and *taken in* is thus poised on the threshold of the interior and the exterior (not for nothing does *RÊVE*'s digital exhibit, [Romanticism in 45 Objects](#), simulate a physical museum environment that incorporates sublime landscape vistas through its “windows”). To this end, the museum evokes the mind and its metaphors, in keeping with ways of considering collections and museums as analogous to the mind's development and functioning. Here, we may note John Locke's evocation of a cabinet or closet as a model for the formation of the human intellect, as it acquires and organizes (arranges, labels—curates, perhaps) sensations and ideas, the raw materials of thought.⁷ Sean Silver, in *The Mind Is a Collection*, explores related models of the mind prominent in Enlightenment epistemology, with reference to Locke's extensive library, Walpole's villa, Joseph Addison's coin collection, and Joshua Reynolds's pivotal role as a collector and founder of the Royal Academy (for Addison, the mind was like a cabinet of medals; for Reynolds, a gallery of images). These are notably museum-like entities that “model” habits of thought while also providing “a working space of thinking”—or what Silver calls a “cognitive ecology” (5).
11. While this curatorial model of the mind was replaced in the Romantic period by a more “organic” one (with an emphasis on “genius, autonomous invention, or creativity” [Silver 3]), it evidently lingers, if with more poetic and personal associations. The space of the

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garden offers itself as just such a “cognitive ecology” (Addison was also, not incidentally, a keen gardener). In his “literary” garden in the park of La Vallée-aux-Loups, France, François-René de Chateaubriand amassed “the most complete collection of planted trees, both exotic and natural, in the whole of France,” among them the [cedar of Lebanon](#) featured in *RÊVE* (Degout); each allegedly bore a close relationship to his memories, experiences, and literary works. In this way, trees “materialised” Chateaubriand’s memory, while taking on lives of their own. This draws our attention to the activity of the human subject, both receptor and receptacle, in ways that include a participant-audience (or reader). As Barbara Maria Stafford suggests in *Good Looking*, the multidimensional material nature of the eighteenth-century cabinet and its kin—those “monumental poetic *armoires*”—invites viewers to navigate imaginatively between objects that are not simply “physical phenomena,” but “material links permitting the beholder to retrieve complicated personal and cultural associations” (75).⁸

12. The writer’s house-museum is a good instance of these tendencies in action: the creations of such figures as Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill, William Beckford at [Fonthill Abbey](#) (Harvey), and Walter Scott at Abbotsford tangibly materialize their preoccupations as writers, blending their fictional productions in imaginative ways with the objects and (domestic) spaces of their collections. The mutually informing activities of collecting and writing amplify literary interiority, containing and inscribing the author—if only to extend or externalize those efforts through the medium of print. At a minimum, what is at stake here is another prominent trope of the period: the impact of place on the imagination, as is clear, for example, in Simon Brown’s discussion of the importance of [Newstead Abbey](#) for

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Byron. Yet objects in the domestic sphere may serve as more free-standing vehicles for the synthetic activities of the material imagination. Byron's four-panelled decoupage [folding screen](#), currently on display at Newstead, is aptly described by Sonia Hofkosh as an “evocative mixed-media library” as well as a testament to the “mobility of the Romantic imagination.” A flexible divider of space, the screen is “elaborately decorated on each side with a cut and pasted mosaic of text and images”; it is suggestively akin to “a giant scrapbook,” its two sides (like a page) offering a vivid showcase for Byron's interests in the theatre and the boxing ring (Hofkosh). Byron did not take the screen with him when he left England for Europe in 1816—it was purchased by John Murray, at the sale of Byron's book collection at the time of his departure.

The Museum: Moves

13. If the museum can be seen as (a) mindful, recalling the importance of cabinets, caddies, and chests, we carry it both within and with us—a point that recalls the relationship of the museum to travel noted above. To this end, the travelling case is a kind of museum in transit, reflecting identity in action, extending and extruding the self, while containing its necessary material supports. János Erdélyi's [travelling box](#) offers an intriguingly multi-purpose, even multidisciplinary organizational (and personal) space, and indeed an early version of the laptop, since its owner could use it on his lap when travelling—which, in Erdélyi's case, was on his Grand Tour in the 1840s. As Emese Asztalos's *RÊVE* entry specifies, the box served numerous functions: “writing-desk, toilet-table [complete with a mirror, helpful perhaps for shaving], treasure chest, work place.” It held his “papers, inks,

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correspondence, and pens, [and] it could hide toilet accessories and secret belongings.” As a space for accumulating and formulating impressions, ideas, and experiences, it might be thought of as an archive in the making, a material index (or “symbolic element”) of Hungarian intellectual history, mediated by the figure of Erdélyi, who also, while on his travels, avidly collected “books, engravings, replicas of famous statues, and oil paintings” (Asztalos).⁹

14. In a general way, objects such as this box, or Bettina von Arnim’s [handbag](#) (Bunzel) or Teresa Guiccioli’s [travelling chest](#) (Saglia), speak to us of how things might be contained for a period of time—packed, and unpacked—filed, retrieved, or left behind. In the case of Guiccioli’s travelling case, the object is displayed shut, foregrounding its beautiful mahogany exterior. Diego Saglia’s entry for *RÊVE* notes its intimate relation to the world of consumer goods, its role as a container for the luxury items (such as toiletries and other intimate articles) proper to the woman traveller of Guiccioli’s rank. “As such, it bears witness to a subject, Teresa, positioned between different times and places and casting herself as ‘on the move’ and in relation to the objects she carries with her”—objects that change of necessity as its bearer moves through time and space. More intriguing still, however, are the changes in the container’s use, since later in Guiccioli’s life it became her own personal and portable Byron museum, a receptacle in which she kept his letters and other mementoes associated with him and with their relationship—a travelling case, as Saglia points out, that now facilitated travel back in time: “It became a treasure box of memories of events and emotions associated with Teresa’s life-changing encounter with Byron, thus also mutating into a material container of celebrity,” modulating between his

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presence and absence. Moreover, each memento was carefully tagged, like a museum display.

15. But objects move, too, quite apart from their containers, and in every sense of the word. Consider for example Goethe's [lock of hair](#) (Hearn and Reynolds), an intriguing object held not in a museum as such but by a library (the Taylorian Institution in Oxford)—and not a book, but a framed ensemble of a portrait, a dried violet, and the lock of hair, accompanied by two authenticating inscriptions. Like the nineteenth-century addendum on the back of a painting purported to be by Salvator Rosa in the [fictional collection](#) (Seth) of Mme de Staël's *Corinne*, that conveys details of its provenance and of important figures it has come into contact with, these inscriptions bear suggestively on the documentary function and potentially amplifying (or narrowing) effects of museum labelling in general. The *RÊVE* entry, by Nick Hearn and Susan Reynolds, follows the possible pathways of Goethe's hair to its current location, along a trajectory from Weimar to Oxford via Liverpool, tracing connections through the descendants of Johannes Daniel Falk (1768–1826), who is named in one of the inscriptions as “the Satirist and friend of Goethe.” In this way (through personal connections and geographic dislocation) the museum moves, even when movement is, as it were, put on hold. But it also moves *us*: its things stir us to respond, not only by making connections of our own, but by registering the complexity of what makes them “present,” in both space and time.

The Museum: Associates

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16. Here we point back to the way the museum is a gathering place for things, placed (provisionally) so that points of connection make up the connectivity that constitutes a substantial part of what is on display. In order for the museum to become an active scene of association, things must be brought together, placed cheek by jowl—but objects arrive already freighted with layers of meaning and association, in light of their own cultural biographies, the vagaries of provenance, and from the simple fact of having been (or not having been) chosen. The [Tahitian mourning dress](#) (Schaff) acquired on Cook’s second voyage (in 1774), like so many ethnographic objects, passed through circuits of exchange in which its “symbolic and material value” inevitably altered (though pointedly, such an object takes on additional meaning through its association with Cook, and everything his voyages represented to a keenly interested public).¹⁰ Such objects and the narratives accruing to them, as Barbara Schaff’s entry points out, “fuelled the literary imagination.” And while they may retain a certain aura and authenticity related to their origins (and original function), they were “often misinterpreted as they were translated, remediated, and adapted to a European notion of Pacific cultures.”
17. In principle, an object’s biography remains part of it and travels with it—but is this invariably the case? The museum asks us to consider the extent to which, located elsewhere, objects signify differently, under the pressure of a different “way of seeing.” [Tippoo’s Tiger](#) (Fournier), now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, is associated not only with voyages of exploration, but with the collecting of “curiosities” that was part and parcel of British imperial agendas—in this case, on the part of the East India Company, which accumulated a large collection of specimens, artifacts, and curiosities at its London

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headquarters (by the mid-1800s, these formally constituted the “India Museum”). Among its most notable exhibits was Tippoo’s wooden tiger, which was taken from the palace of Seringapatam. The “Royal Tyger” stands over the figure of a prostrate British soldier, which it is apparently devouring, to the accompaniment of an in-built barrel organ emitting both the terrifying roars of the tiger and the screams of its helpless victim. Its original owner, Tippoo Sultan, for whom the figure of the tiger (both symbolic and exotic) was something of a fetish, likely experienced it differently to the curious Londoners who flocked to see it once it went on display in the East India House museum in the early 1800s, along with other objects taken at the storming of Seringapatam (among them a massive gold tiger’s head with a movable tongue, and articles of clothing worn by Tippoo; MacGregor, *Company Curiosities* 168–76). As the entry in *RÊVE* notes, the “man-tiger-organ” was a multivalent object: “an automaton, a sculpture in the Gothic taste, a musical instrument, an instance of popular craftsmanship in the spirit of the Enlightenment, and an elaborate practical joke” (Fournier).

18. Like the mourning dress, an object such as Tippoo’s Tiger may shed or change meaning as it moves, that is to say it dis-associates, which bring us to a problem that the museum has always faced: the question of an object as the culmination of collected stories, as well as of collective knowledge, and the inherent problem of housing those simultaneously, of making them equitably present.¹¹ The museum thus has a tendency to forget: it only saves things because others have been lost. Contradictorily, perhaps, the presence of something brings along its negative, the now empty place from which it has come (or from which it

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has been, in essence, disassociated), along with the other (associated) things, which it is *not*.

The Museum: Remembers

19. It is impossible to avoid the many ways in which, from the Romantic period onward, the museum is understood as a space of memory or memorialization, despite the inevitable forces of forgetting noted above. It also re-members, in the ways that preservation and presence are coextensive with their opposites. Here we may recall the lock of Goethe's hair, and its role as a memorial relic that (like other such body-related remains) is also positioned on the threshold between the living and the dead, and always navigating that threshold, in imagination and in fact. A number of objects featured in *RÊVE* reveal exactly how effectively memorialization works through channels of association, both for museum makers and for the museum goers who receive them at a potentially substantial historical remove. [Shelley's inkstand](#) (Mercer), [Sir Walter Scott's slippers](#) (Schaff) at the Writers' Museum in Edinburgh, and perhaps especially his famous [elbow chair](#) (Archer-Thompson), on display at Abbotsford, are objects that touch or extend the writer's (now absent) body, that bring them, through those present objects, into "contact" with us. The writer's inkstand is not only a potent extension of the active writing body but readily replicable and transported—a chair less so, although in Scott's case, such is the fascination of the place where so much literary activity took place (it operates, Archer-Thompson suggests, as a "portal to Scott's imagination") that miniature porcelain replicas of the chair have become popular items of Scott-related memorabilia.¹² As Nicola Watson writes of

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Petrarch's [inkstand](#), which is included as an object in *RÊVE* because it first comes to notice in the diary of Samuel Rogers in 1814 (Rogers later owned a replica in silver), such items attest to the “increased celebrity of the writer’s desk, chair and desk furniture in the Romantic period”—precisely because “they staged imaginative creation, collapsing past time into present place and so enabling a newly immediate intimacy between dead writer and live admirer.”

20. If in a more funereal manner, the reliquary of [Vivant Denon](#) is a particularly resonant object in this context. Reliquaries in general, as cabinets of (portable) items associated with the dead, are of interest in and of themselves, but in a secondary way, in connection with their (now also dead) possessors (consider for instance the “Byron Urn” at Abbotsford, a gift from Byron to Scott containing, as an inscription spells out, bones “found in certain ancient sepulchres within the long walls of Athens, in the month of February 1811”). Denon’s reliquary, now in the Musée Bertrand in Châteauroux, France, is a veritable museum in miniature, with potent historical and literary associations—and very much of its own moment. A Gothic architectural construction in gilded copper, glass, and semiprecious stone, with turrets and flying buttresses, its numerous compartments contain bone fragments belonging to El Cid and Dona Jimena (taken from their tomb in Burgos), and to Heloïse and Abelard (also taken from their tombs); hair from Agnès Sorel and Inês de Castro, and from the moustache of King Henri IV; a fragment of the shroud of Turenne; bone fragments of Molière and La Fontaine; and a half-tooth of Voltaire’s. Some of these were acquired (with the assistance of Alexandre Lenoir, founder of the Musée des Monuments Français in 1795) as a consequence of upheaval and exhumations during the

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Revolutionary period, such as at the opening of royal tombs, in 1793, housed in Saint-Denis. Other items were of immediate historical significance. As the catalogue for the sale of Denon's collection specified, these were closely associated with Napoleon: an autograph signature, "a bloodstained fragment of the chemise he was wearing when he died, a lock of his hair, and a leaf from the willow tree beneath which he is buried on the island of St Helena."¹³ Notably, the reliquary was also a collection within a collection—one item within Denon's extensive personal holdings, with their close relationship to his curatorial efforts at the Louvre under Napoleon, for whom he served as director-general of museums between 1802 and 1815. It is not surprising, then, that these relics were so carefully arranged and placed behind glass, with handwritten labels (Richard-Desaix 33).

21. The "saintly" body relic, in this context, becomes a secular object, as it transitions from the enclosed spaces of the church (or the grave) into the comparatively open spaces of the public sphere: it is precisely, after all, in this period that such items became rationalized museum objects for the first time, taking their place in the historically oriented displays of the modern museum—just as museums themselves adopted their now familiar social and civic functions, one of which is to make things visible (see proposition 1), even if what becomes visible is predicated on the contingencies of history, along with the fragile, associative power of memory. The exhibition of personal effects and bodily remains, from ashes to bone, depends precisely on the importance, real or imagined, of "having belonged to" that in part arose from the eighteenth-century *culte des grands hommes* (Bodenstein, para. 4). A relic here, in this newly secular context, is a memento, or an object perpetually

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kept in remembrance of something or someone else, whose lost presence is thereby made, tangibly, present.

The Museum: Models

22. Like the “cognitive ecology” of the cabinet, the museum is an active model for itself, in ways that relate to the question of scale as well as the means of containment. Like Denon’s reliquary, it both is, and represents, what it is. As I have attempted to suggest above, it is the active scene as well as the signifying structure for the set of operations that it affords. In the Musée Alpin in Chamonix, we find a leather-bound alpine visitor’s book from the early nineteenth century—the [Livre d’or de la Flégère](#) (Vincent). It is an object prized for its expansiveness: folio sized, 635 pages, fifteen thousand visitor entries (including 150 or so “poems, sketches, and doodles”), multiple languages, and unparalleled historical coverage (1831–1855). An archive of impressions, it collects and documents all manner of personal, perhaps predictable, often undoubtedly idiosyncratic observations of travellers to that famous region. There are some sixty illustrations, many featuring mules; the photographed page featured in *RÊVE* dates from September 1834 and depicts a group of four animated, and fashionably attired, tourists looking across the valley at the sharply outlined peaks of Mont Blanc.

23. The object offers us the record of a prospect, one that would itself be remediated in countless ways, since La Flégère offered an accessible viewpoint of Mont Blanc. Recommended by guidebooks, it would become a (detached) spectacle. Robert Burford’s

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1835 panorama of Mont Blanc, for example, was created from a central point nearby (note also Albert Richard Smith's dramatic recreation of the "Ascent of Mont Blanc," mounted at the Egyptian Hall in the early 1850s). Now, as a museum object, it replicates, outside its covers, the very act it documents within. Visitors to the Musée Alpin, some also more illustrious than others, come to inspect and perhaps even admire it, and to be momentarily carried away in both time and space. And so, its power (to make us see, but also to move, to associate, and to remember) in fact lies elsewhere: neither inside nor outside, it is both bound and unbound, specific and excessive.

24. The "museum" thus performs various closely related functions: a physical and imaginative means of transport, it activates thought, experience, and memory, and facilitates forms of (self) knowledge mediated by the many modes of materiality. And yet it is as much conceptual and concrete. To what, then, does this collection of observations about the "museum" add up? They too are meant to work, in a fluid manner, to inform a way of approaching the digital cabinet that is *RÊVE*, of seeing it as a model for a kind of museum that is ostensibly not a museum but a powerful tool for materializing Romanticism because (as a way of seeing) it shows us how this might be done. Like the curiosity cabinet, the objects there are decontextualized—isolated for attentive study, or perhaps for dreaming—only to be recomposed in more potentially expansive and inclusive ways, productively refracting the "museum effect."

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Notes

¹ *Hospital* is etymologically related to such terms as *hostel* and *hotel*, which invites us to consider the museum-as-hospital in connection with charity (hospitality) as well as transience. (See also Thomas, "Things").

² For a detailed and comprehensive overview, see Altick; and Thomas, "Collection." For a cogent survey of scholarship up to 2006 that addresses British Romanticism in the museum age, see Gidal. More recently, Emma Peacocke offers a selective examination of the cultural

preoccupations typified by public museums and, more particularly, the role they came to play in a broadly literary understanding of the public sphere and in the articulation of a “new” Britain. Readers might also be interested in Judith Pascoe’s delightful study of collecting in the Romantic period and the special issue of *Romanticism on the Net* on *Recollecting the Nineteenth-Century Museum* (Thomas).

³ By contrast, digital platforms can be effective tools for the re-creation of the period’s lost museums, such as the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery and the British Institution, reconstituted beautifully by Janine Barchas, who uses historical documentation to replicate the original arrangement of artworks and to recover, as far as possible, the experience of a contemporary visitor.

⁴ In their introduction to a collection of essays exploring the relevance and productive potential of cabinets of curiosities in contemporary practices of collection, Amy Johnson, Janelle A. Schwarz, and Nhora Lucía Serrano propose that “the organization and experience of the cabinet offer an alternative vision to the rigidity of a museal gaze as well as the unyielding structure of linearly organized museum collections, while accommodating a cultural moment that seems chaotic in its plenitude” (Johnson et al 3). They refer to our own historical moment, but chaotic plenitude is as applicable to the Romantic period, when the circulation, collection, and consumption of material things, under pressure of the forces of economics and politics, gathers palpable momentum.

⁵ Barbara Maria Stafford, in *Voyage into Substance*, discusses this issue, citing numerous lofty vantage points from which travellers experience infinitely open and unknown prospects, from popular, natural observatories in the Swiss mountains to the panoramas provided by ballooning at the turn of the nineteenth century (431–35).

⁶ This watercolour, in the collections of the British Museum, is described as copied “from a drawing made on the spot”; Stone’s original is now held by the State Library of New South Wales, <https://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110316871>.

⁷ From Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. 2, ch. 11, sec. 17, p. 163, as cited by MacGregor, *Curiosity* 56.

⁸ Here too, Stafford regards the material components of Enlightenment collections, the fossils, minerals and coins stuffed into boxes, drawers, and shelves, as the precursors of the “magical conjuring devices” of the electronic world of digital media (Stafford, *Good Looking* 74–78).

⁹ All of this, as the *RÊVE* entry elaborates, is highly appropriate: “The versatility and interdisciplinarity of his interests are indicated by the diversity and various forms of his lifework. He was a journalist, editor, critic, academic, theatre-director, teacher, essay-writer, and the first textbook writer of Hungarian philosophy.” (Asztalos).

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of these issues in relation to the feather cloaks acquired on Cook’s third voyage, see Thomas, “Feather Cloaks.” On the cultural biographies of objects, see Appadurai.

¹¹ On the complexities of this point, see Rogers and Thomas.

¹² See Rigney for an account of “memory on the move” in the case of Scott.

¹³ See Mauriès 200, citing the *Catalogue de la vente Denon*, no. 346 (Paris, 1826); see also Richard-Desaix.