Was Culture a Commodity 'all' Victorians Could Afford? – Notes on the First British Public Museums

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ABSTRACT

The etymology of *mouseion* gave rise to the word 'museum' and initially referred to the temple of the Muses. It is noteworthy to recall that the first museum was the Alexandria Museum, set up by Ptolemy in 300 B.C., as a temple, a library, an astronomical observatory, an amphitheatre, a botanical garden and a research venue (Anico 105). The outset of museums can be found later on in private collections, which continued until mid-18th century. Additionally, with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, museums started being regarded as an ally to combat myths, dogmata and superstitions and thus 'Curiosity Cabinets' were gradually replaced by the first public museums, such as the Galleria degli Uffizi (1571), in Florence, the British Museum (1753), in London, and the Louvre Museum (1793), in Paris. Simpson (126–127) considers these new cultural spaces as a means for European powers to re-write their history and exhibit their past deeds, as well as a way to show off the heritage they unlawfully gathered in their colonial periods, in line with the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, in London. Taking these assumptions into account, we aim at describing the birth of the first British public museums and the resources they wished to make available to their visitors (e.g. admission fees, facilities, lighting and guides), so as to reflect on the underlying concept of access to culture in Victorian mindset. Was culture a commodity then? In line with Kelly (*Culture as Commodity*), cultural products and services may have symbolic or even status-symbolic dimensions and this understanding leads us to a further question related to the target audiences of Victorian museums: Were they supposed to be accessible to everyone? Or were they merely for "the initiated" vs. "the primitive" (Chu)?

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INTRODUCTION

We start off from the idea of culture as a commodity, which has been thoroughly discussed by numerous authors, as Kelly argues: Levy (1959); Hirschman (1980); Engel et al. (1978); Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981); Rook (1984); or McCracken (1986), to name just a few. This is to say that products and services may have symbolic and status-symbolic dimensions, since they reflect, in some way, social stratification: "the status symbols (objects) evolve because they connote a meaningful use of leisure or 'reveal taste', not necessarily wealth" (Kelly, *Culture as commodity* 347). The need to cultivate taste and enable the masses to improve their own was undeniably ubiquitous during the Victorian Age, as we shall try to prove.

However, one must not forget that these concepts are ideologically intertwined with Marx's thought, along with many others who followed him (e.g. Weber, Durkheim, Merton and Parsons), and, in the last quarter of the 20th century, Pierre Bourdieu's proposal for economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals. According to Bourdieu (*The forms of capital*), cultural capital can be found in the embodied state ("long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body", 47), in the objectified state (particularly cultural goods) and in the institutionalised state (such as educational qualifications), whereas the symbolic capital relies on the effects that acquiring cultural goods materially or symbolically may wield on people's power and prestige in social contexts. Therefore, symbolic capital appears to be a way to legitimise economic, social and cultural capitals.

The abovementioned concept of culture as a commodity has evolved from purely materialistic products to experiential products that bear "status-symbolic" – "an experience of ritual significance" (Kelly *Culture as commodity*, 348). Cultural objects and culture experiences, in which Kelly includes "museum and gallery visiting, opera, symphony, ballet and the legitimate theatre (...) [and] cultural tourism" (348), function as a means to reveal taste "among statused persons", particularly for those who are "newly-statused" (348).

Leisure being an indicator of status, it is then of the utmost importance to stress quality over quantity (Kelly, *Culture as commodity* 348). Bourdieu and Passeron (cit. Kelly) focus on the fact that, to appreciate high culture, one must be greatly educated and socialised, otherwise confronting "a cultural object cold" will carry no meaning nor pleasure. Therefore, these authors uphold that education and culture in France "widen existing systems of social inequalities", and, we would also add, in other places worldwide, especially so in the 19th century and during most part of the 20th century.

The need for education and socialisation that is to enable the understanding of "cold cultural objects" finds echo in Chu's dichotomy of "the initiate" vs. "the primitive", which emphasises the fact that it is essential to acquire background knowledge to be able to grasp what is concealed inside cultural venues, such as museums. This knowledge is what Kelly (*The Socio-Symbolic Role of Museums*) names the "language of the curator" and Bourdieu (*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*) the "code". As a result, this growing awareness led to the birth of accessibility concerns, namely through interpretative labels placed besides museum objects and, later in the 20th century, by means of education services (i.e. learning centres), guided visits, hands-on workshops, extended hours and various technological gadgets. All these resources intend(ed) to reach an optimum as far as accessibility is concerned, to overthrow the barriers identified by Dodd and Sandell, i.e. physical, sensory, financial, cultural, intellectual and emotional access, as well as access to decision-making and to information.

Taking the above-mentioned in consideration, we aim at analysing accessibility strategies used in the first British public museums, in order to answer the question raised in the title: whether 19th-century culture was in fact a commodity that everyone could access or it was merely intended for "the initiated" (Chu), those who mastered "the code" (Bourdieu, *The forms of capital*). Therefore, the paper shall be divided into three main parts: the first will focus on a historical overview of museums, followed by an emphasis on the Victorian Age and its museums. In the last part, we shall present a brief history of the selected museums, along with a description of their accessibility choices, when information is available. The museums designated for the purpose of this paper were: the Ashmolean Museum (1683), the British Museum (1753), the National Gallery (1824), the House-Museum Sir John Soane (1837), the Victoria and Albert Museum (1857), the National Portrait Gallery (1859), the Natural History Museum (1881) and Tate Gallery (1897). At last, we will attempt to draw some conclusions from the data collected.

THE HISTORY OF MUSEUMS IN A NUTSHELL

[T]he museum is the keeper of the cultural faith, the bride of the politician, the long arm of the law, the enforcer of an opinion (...), is a whorehouse is mausoleum is a department store is a secular cathedral is a disease is a glory... (Black 18–19)

The etymology of the word 'museum' is found in the Greek word *mouseion*, which, according to Simpson (125), meant the temple of the muses, the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne who were the goddesses of the arts and science and served as inspiration for artists, poets, philosophers and musicians. The first museum ever was the *Mouseion* of Alexandria, which, in the words of Anico (105), was presumably built by Ptolemy in 300 B.C. to homage the muses and comprehended a library, an astronomical observatory, an amphitheatre, a botanical and zoological garden and various spaces for teaching and research. It was also in Alexandria, c. 290 B.C., that the *mouseion* began to designate the spaces where artistic, historical and scientific objects were intentionally exhibited and where one could attend music, dance and theatre performances (Martins 18).

Thereafter, Anico (105) refers to the pre-museum nature of private collections owned by clergymen, princes and military chiefs who would acquire these treasures with an advertising purpose, to show off their power in the public sphere, but especially when conquering other peoples. With the end of the Roman Empire, the Chambers of Treasures followed these first private collections and continued being the propriety of the clergy and of the nobility. From the Roman Empire period to the Renaissance, there was a stage of gathering religious objects, such as statues, relics, and retables. In the Renaissance, the Médicis family retrieved the idea of the museum as a place of storage and intentional exhibition of objects, creating thus, in 1571, what is known as the first public museum of the world – the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence.

During the Maritime Expansion, emissaries were sent to the four corners of the world, in order to acquire manuscripts, vases, statues, jewellery, among other objects, which would enrich the collections of the wealthiest families in Europe. This ostentatious practice was supposed to build up a social and economic image of superiority – an obsession for what Lira (40) calls the cult and museography of the unique. As a result, throughout the Renaissance, the palaces of the wealthy started displaying long corridors and galleries where sculpture and paintings were exhibited, since collecting was a mark of erudition (cf. Alonso Fernández 1999 cit. Anico 107).

The interest in collecting natural and artificial curiosities and in setting up exhibition spaces went on, eventually leading to the birth of the Curiosity Cabinets, an example of which is, according to Coats (2), the 17th century "Ark of rarities" (or The Ark) owned by John Tradescant, the elder and the younger. In the words of Anico (108), these Curiosity Cabinets were a privilege of private collectors and they consisted of a "mera justaposição de objectos científicos e artísticos, desprovidos de qualquer propósito de classificação, hierarquização ou especialização, com o intuito de reproduzir uma determinada cosmologia (...) [a] do seu proprietário".[1] Dunham (42) goes as far as to compare these collectors to 'hoarders', people who compulsively gather objects, and their curiosities collected in *horror vacui*, for they were completely disconnected from their original context and thus meaningless. Moreover, Hooper-Greenhill (122–123) sustains that these places reflect the Renaissance epistemology and intended to prescribe order and meaning to the world, enabling the collectors to place themselves in this universe. Then, with time, the word 'museum' began to include the building itself where the curiosities could be contemplated.

It is worth mentioning the architecture of these spaces: inspired in the Greek temple and in the Roman pantheon, museums showed a model of aesthetic supremacy in terms of power and authority, which would be translated in the architectural style of buildings storing private and later public collections (Dunham 40). The architecture was characterised by a style of defence and war: museums were true fortresses guarding collections that reflected both the status of power and of monument, and simultaneously offered comfort and security.

Following the Enlightenment, associated with rational thought and scientific progress, on the one hand, and the French Revolution, defender of new rights of citizenship and equality, on the

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1   This and all further translations are by the author: mere juxtaposition of scientific and artistic objects, deprived of any purpose of classification, hierarchisation or specialisation, aiming at reproducing a particular cosmology (...) that of their owner.

other, museums were to be regarded as an ally to combat myths, dogmata and superstitions, as Martins (20) upholds. As a result, the Enlightenment adds the need to preserve the belief that art can educate and entertain the masses, despite the fact that, according to Dunham (40), architecture would impede the outside world, because of its limited direct light and lack of transparency, an obstacle that accompanied museums until the 20th century.

The publication of Diderot's *Encyclopaedia* with its underlying taxonomic concerns, representing the world as if it was itself an encyclopaedia (cf. Anico 108), brought about the need to organise collections according to different areas. This division by disciplines favoured the appearance of the first sections and specialised series of objects, such as:

> peças de carácter histórico, objetos exóticos, curiosidades da natureza, elementos técnicos ou obras artísticas, exibidas de acordo com as suas características formais e morfológicas, com a possibilidade de classificação dentro do mesmo conjunto, grupo, família ou espécie (…) privilegiando antes a construção de um conhecimento susceptível de verificação e controle mediante a adopção de uma linguagem taxonómica e classificatória universal.[2] (Anico 110)

Private collections would continue up to the mid-18th century, a time when museums gradually began to open to the public. It was in the context that the once Curiosity Cabinets and Galleries gave rise to the first public museums, from which Anico (112) mentions the University Museum of Basilica (1671), currently Switzerland, the Ashmolean Museum (1683) in Oxford, numerous museums in the Vatican (1750), and the British Museum (1753) in London. Notwithstanding, it is from the 19th century onwards that the majority of the museums becomes public.

Many authors select the Louvre as an icon of public museums. In 1793, Napoleon renovated the king's palace to become the "people's palace" (Black 9). To this effect, the Louvre unlocked its doors in the first anniversary of the French Revolution, free and open to everyone, in line with the true democratic thought, exhibiting the king's spoils and the crown's jewellery (Chu 95). The Louvre appeared to be more inclusive than the Republic itself, because the only political agents of the time were adult men with property.

Furthermore, Chu (96–97) elaborates on Louvre's (pseudo-)inclusive approach, by citing an excerpt of Zola, from his work "L'Assommoir" [The Dram Shop]. Through this example, Chu (2010) intends to demonstrate that, despite being "open to everyone", not all citizens of this newly-founded republic could have intellectual and emotional access to the exhibited objects. In this text, Zola describes the visit of a newly-wed couple (a launderer and a roofer) and their guests to the Louvre, in a rainy afternoon:

> a **primitive** wedding party was making a tour of the Louvre and hurried with laughing faces to enjoy the scene, while the weary bride and bridegroom, accompanied by their friends, clumsily moved about over the shining, resounding floors much like **cattle let loose** and with quite as keen an appreciation of the marvellous beauties about them. (Project Gutenberg) [our bold]

As the above excerpt clearly illustrates, the whole description is embedded with a condescending perspective towards "the primitive", whose behaviour is compared to that of "cattle let loose". This vision of the past resounded in a 2010 controversy when Maxwell Anderson, director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, was interviewed by Robin Pobregrin and stated that: "museum visitors who matter are the 'initiated'; the 'primitive' that come through the museum, lured either by some populist exhibition or by the tourist industry, have no residual value to the museum" (100).

Returning to the Louvre, Dunham (40) emphasises the fact that this museum was actually the first national collection ever to become public in the world, thus challenging the church's authority. Quoting Newhouse, Dunham (40) claims that art turned into the secular religion and the museum became the ultimate sacred space.

This exponential increase in the number of museums, particularly striking in the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, is explained by Simpson (126–127) as a

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2   Translation: pieces of historical nature, exotic objects, natural curiosities, technical elements or artistic works, exhibited according to their formal and morphological features, likely to be classified within the same set, group, family or species (…) privileging above all the construction of knowledge susceptible to being verified and controlled by means of the adoption of a universal taxonomic and classificatory language.

means not only for European powers to rewrite their history and flaunt their past deeds, but also to exhibit the objects and collections gathered throughout their colonial periods.

> Os museus serviam os propósitos do colonialismo ao destacar as transições de sociedades simples e complexas para sociedades complexas e modernas, divulgando a mensagem de que as sociedades 'tradicionais' eram colonizadas para o seu próprio bem no sentido da sua 'modernização'.[3] (Dicks 2003, cit. Anico 117)

It is in this period that the modern museum appears, by establishing a clear distinction between private and public spaces – private spaces would be those where knowledge was produced and banned from the general public, whereas the public spaces were those where knowledge was to be consumed (Hooper-Greenhill). In the galleries, visitors received, observed and learnt from what was decided "backstage", an idea that presupposes that visitors knew nothing. Therefore, Chu (97) argues yet again that it was in England that many museum curators and directors acknowledged the fact that free access to the museums would not be enough and that museums had to make their contents accessible. Between 1830 and 1840, it became clear that basic information about museum objects would need to be provided. However, in truth name and date of the piece of art and artist, as well as nomenclature of plants and animals, would little contribute to the visitors' understanding of the museum or to their accessibility.

An iconic example to be taken into account is Henry Cole, the first director of the South Kensington Museum (currently Victoria and Albert Museum, henceforth V&A), since he upheld that it would be paramount to improve the taste of designers and producers, but also the general public's who might intend to purchase those goods. As a result, Henry Cole founded Cole's Museum, in London, "filled with contemporary consumer goods that he and a select committee had deemed to be 'in good taste'" (Chu 98), to which he later added historical objects coming from the decorative arts. In this museum, Cole also included an education museum for children, a patent museum, a building museum and a food museum, where objects would be given special attention to enable visitors' intellectual access, since their labels would contain not only names and dates, but also other levels of information. The aim of these descriptive labels was to foster understanding in the non-initiate – "This museum will be like a book with its pages always open, not shut" (Cole cit. Chu 98).

Finally, Russell (19) endorses the idea that the old museums are symptomatic of an encyclopaedic vision of the world, with a specific ontology and epistemology, and their organisation allows to retrieve inherent assumptions about the way visitors should build up their knowledge. In fact, museums reflect a positivist vision of the world governed by rules, opposed to the constructivist approach that was to be developed during the 20th century.

THE VICTORIAN AGE AND MUSEUMS

> *Victorian society constructed museums, celebrated museums and criticized museums, attended museums, worked in museums, wrote about museums, and collected in homage to museums. (Black 4)*

Black's proposition is that the 19th century gave rise to the modern museum and Victorian culture was a museum culture, due to:

> key political events and social and cultural forces: the British involvement in imperialism, exploration, and tourism; advances in science and changing attitudes about knowledge; the nationalist commitment to improve public taste through mass education; the growing hegemony of the middle class and the subsequent insurgence of bourgeois fetishism and commodity culture; and the democratization of luxury endangered by the French Revolution and the industrial revolution. (9)

Using George Bataille's comparison, Black sustains that the museum is like the guillotine, i.e. the people's instrument of power. Therefore, "Victorian positivism and Darwinism represent a response of control and order to the spectre of chaos" (Black 15), a means to hold off the

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3   Translation: Museums used to serve the purposes of colonisation by emphasising the shifts from simple and complex societies to complex and modern societies, spreading the idea that 'traditional' societies were colonised for their own good, in view of their 'modernisation'.

hanging fear of the replication of a French Revolution on British ground. In line with this, Darwin and his works were also understood as "a way to clear away the mist and illuminate the mystery of the mysteries" (Black 15). Having said this, Victorian Age was equipped with the right conditions to become the age of public museums.

According to Black (1), the 19th century was "an age of builders", which not only enabled the rebuilding of the city of London, but also the construction of the city's cultural identities. The author argues that "the museum did possess a centripetal force; it was the age's great enterprise" (4), realised in the opening of the National Gallery in 1824, the house-museum of Sir John Soane in 1837, the South Kensington complex in 1857, the National Portrait Gallery in 1859, the Natural History Museum, in 1881, and the Tate Gallery, in 1897. All great Victorian projects involved compilation, organisation and display, in effect, the activities that are paramount to museum activity.

From Black's viewpoint, Victorianism marked the height of the phenomenon of museum culture. This author (2) quotes Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold's "London: A Pilgrimage", where the authors list the marvels to be found in London – the British Museum; the South Kensington Museum; the Zoological and Horticultural Gardens; the Museum of Practical Geometry; the India Museums; the Houses of Parliament; the Mint; the National Gallery. By using this reference, Black emphasises "how museums, these earthly paradises, enchanted Victorian culture. Museums provided so much to the observing eye. They bewitched with their abundance [transforming] the site of collection into utopia" (3). A museum allows for an imaginary time travel, for "a culture to stand outside itself within itself, to leave the realm of the merely familiar while staying at home" (3). Black also mentions Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine's "Notes on England", where he calls museums "masterpieces of good arrangement and of ordered comfort", "a slick enterprise of efficiency and control at work" (4).

The Victorian Age was intensely marked by a series of World Fairs, among which the Great Exhibition of 1851 (see *Figure 1*), held in Hyde Park, London, and organised by Prince Albert and Henry Cole, after Cole's visit to the French Exhibition, as well as to the Royal Society of
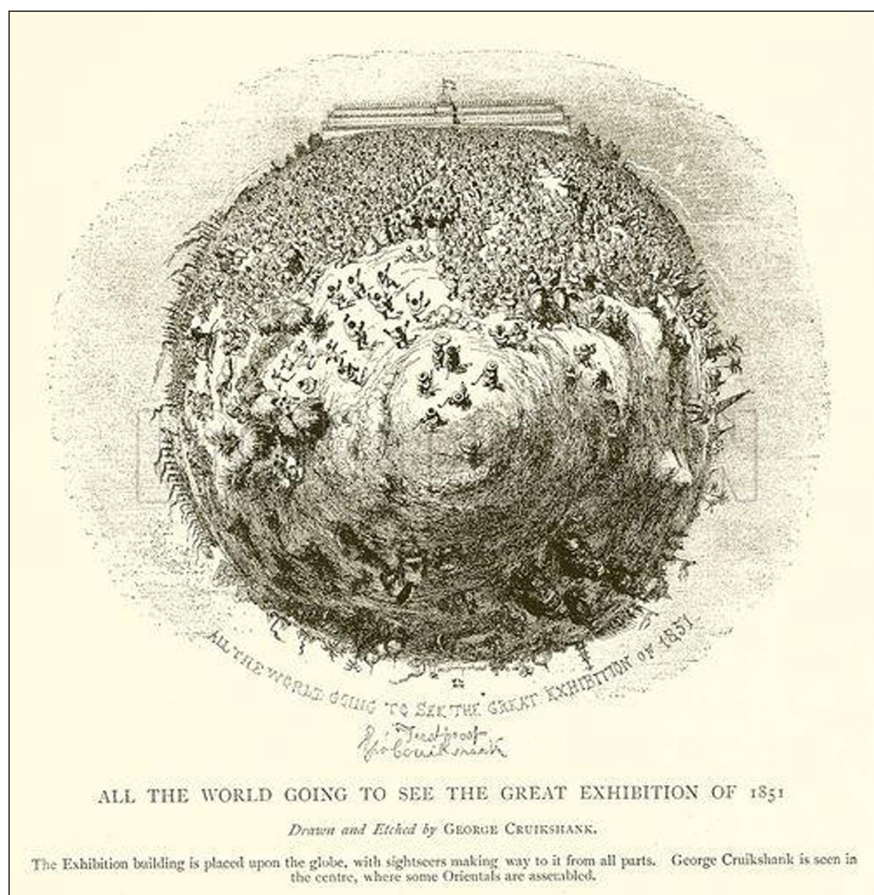

Figure 1 "All the world going to see the Great Exhibition" (1851) by George Cruikshank.[4]

Arts. The Great Exhibition intended to be "a showcase for Britain's rich, infinite productions and reproduction" (Black 10). It hosted over 6m visitors ("the equivalent of one-third of the British population" – cf. V&A's official website) and served as "the prototype for many Victorian museums and a precursor of the South Kensington Museum" (Black 10). This was due to the fact that, after its end, the public at large demanded it to become permanent in their lives, "providing seed money and core collection for the South Kensington" (10–11) museum, which is currently the V&A.

Later in 1862, there was a second world fair, also in London, which was hosted where now stands the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum, opposite the V&A. Searle names a series of Great Exhibitions which followed, "in a more overtly propagandist way" (39): the 1886 Colonies and India Exhibition in London, and the 1899 Greater Britain Exhibition at Earl's Court. The overall patriotic atmosphere was induced not only by "the prestigious public schools", but also by means of public displays that amounted from mid-19th century onwards, as Searle (37–38) argues. The author exemplifies this trend by means of the Horniman Museum in South London and the Pitt-Rivers in Oxford, which "proudly displayed the trophies of the Empire" (39). Despite the obvious intent to manipulate and brainwash the masses, due to the fact that "consumers were bombarded with imperialist imagery, which shrieked out at them from all sides" (40), Searle believes that they were not totally forced to entail the imperialist mindset had they disliked what was on offer. He concludes by saying that "the willingness of all classes to devote money and time on commodities and activities which had an 'imperialist' bias meant that they were generally popular" (40).

In line with the spirit of the time, the Great Exhibition of 1851 brought about the "fetishizing of commodities" (Black 10), "the fascination with plenitude and surplus, [which was] at the heart of Victorian material culture". Both the event and the venue came to be "the preeminent palace of industry (…) [and] a shrine to manufactured things" (10). Along with the grand construction of the Crystal Palace (see *Figure 2*), the Exhibition had a three-volume catalogue entitled *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition,*[5] the first 100 pages of which consisted of "this massively detailed, impressively arranged text [which] showcases a pride that resides less in the material than in the construction of the Crystal Palace itself and its textual counterpart, the catalog" (Black 1).

Figure 2 The interior of the Crystal Palace, Hyde Park, 1851.[6]

Black sustains that both the palace and its catalogue serve as memorials for the greatest constructive project of the 19th century – the civic museum. There is then an inextricable connection between museums and modernity – "museums represent an institutional response

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5   See full version on *https://archive.org/details/officialdescrip00goog*.

6   Figure taken from *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Exhibition*.

to – or a collective making sense of – the immensity of a radically and rapidly changing world order" (8). Moreover, the Exhibition offers a new vision of the world – "a world of objects produced, collected, and consumed" (15).

In addition to the lauded ability to build and reproduce, Black mentions two other authors: Richard Owen, who is known as the man who coined the word 'dinosaur', supported that museums were a means to "stave off revolution in England" (Black 11), the fear of the guillotine and of a people's mob; and Madame Tussaud (herself having been imprisoned in the Palace of Versailles) whose Wax Museum started by exhibiting the victims of the French Revolution from the early stages of its opening to the public. Both "seemed to know that turning political threat into a spectacle would disarm it" (11). Another important aspect lay in the fact that museums were "part of Victoria and Albert's master plan of mass education in taste" (11). However, despite the apparently democratic nature of museums, Black argues that they "generated new oppressions in its wake" (11) or, as Kelly and Chu put it, the widening of existing social inequities.

There is no denying that the museum served to legitimate Britain's power both at home and worldwide: it allowed to "[house] the spoils of colonization and [guard] the growing perimeter of the British empire" (Black 11) – consider Henry Cole's statement that "the possession of British India will always place England amongst the foremost nations of the world" (cit. Black 12). The powers-that-be urged people to visit and attend museums so as to "rule more effectively" overseas (12), an idea based on the notion of the superiority of race, both biological and moral: "But the 'English race' was not usually thought of in purely biological terms, but was envisaged as the carrier of a distinct set of values and institutions which had been successfully transplanted to the colonies of settlement" (Searle 42). Therefore, it was Britain's duty to master other nations around the world in order to spread its culture and its moral.

In addition to the positive overall atmosphere of the Great Exhibitions, imperialism, scientific development, nationalism and middle class growth, we can also pinpoint specific events that concurred to turning the Victorian Age into an age of mass education in taste *par excellence*. To begin with, the role of religion was unmistakingly important. Sabbatarians' tireless agitation "for the statutory prohibition of all Sunday working" (Searle 532–533), for fear of empty churches, was opposed by various working-class people and businesses, who depended on Sunday working. On the other hand, there were "those who advocated Sunday as a 'day of rest and leisure'" (532–533). Hilton (2008) upholds that, between the end of the 18th century and the mid-19th century, the middle classes' indifference to aesthetic values could be explained in light of religion – for instance, Evangelicals favoured the "ear-gate at the expense of the eye-gate of the soul" (Hilton 167).

Regardless of the stiff opposition from religious leaders, in 1896, Parliament allowed the opening of national museums and art galleries on Sundays, "a long-standing demand of bodies such as the National Sunday League and the more recently founded Sunday Society" (Searle 533). Thereafter, the British Museum, the National Gallery and the South Kensington museums started opening to the public on Sunday afternoons, but they would have to compete with public houses and music halls screening films, since shops, theatres and libraries would continue shut. Already in the 20th century, a number of Labour MPs introduced the "Weekly Rest Bill Day" in 1912 that would cover all workers, as Searle points out.

On the other hand, businessmen who had the wealth to make acquisitions maintained their collections private. In fact, for considerable time, Britain was the only European power that did not own a public collection of old masters, a situation which only changed in 1805 (Hilton). It was then that a British Institution for the Promotion of the Fine Arts was established, encouraging young artists to showcase their work and exhibiting privately owned collections. However, proposals for a permanent national collection were met with resistance (for fear of devaluing classic artists' work and of becoming an act of "artistic mercantilism" (168) in line with Catherine the Great and Napoleon's practices) until 1824 when the National Gallery was finally set up and given £60,000 with a view of purchasing John Julius Angerstein's private collection. Despite the undeniable artistic purpose, Hilton endorses the underlying didactic and social aims, i.e. "to educate and civilize the masses" (168). Owing to these

[Sir Robert] Peel insisted that admission should be free at all times, (...) proposals had to be debated in Parliament to ensure that they were politically and morally suitable, and (...) trustees were determined to retain the Gallery at Charing Cross, in reach of the working classes (168).

Regardless of these setbacks, the Gallery began to take off in the 1850s "thanks to an annual grant and a much more sympathetic cultural climate" (168), which contrasted to the "general approbation" that was given to the British Museum (1757), "a centre of *intellectual* excellence [which] benefited hugely from major benefactions (...) [and] rapidly accumulated collections of minerals, fossils, coins, antiquities, books, charters and manuscripts" (169–170), making London the second intellectual capital, after Paris.

All in all, the Victorian Age gathered the ideal conditions for democratising culture and making it into a commodity to "the initiate", as well as "the primitive", regardless of the fact that this would, from an early stage, widen existing inequities, as mentioned above, and there was yet no such thing as "access for all".

THE FIRST PUBLIC MUSEUMS

I heartily wish there were already, as one day there must be, large educational museums in every district of London, freely open every day, and well lighted and warm at night, with all furniture of comfort, and full aids for the use of their contents by all classes. (John Ruskin cit. Black 6)

Bearing in mind the abovementioned, Black (quoting Richard Altick) upholds that the movement from the 18th to the 19th centuries was marked by the shift from the age of exhibitions to the age of public museums. Black defines museum as follows: "a complex civic space, open to the people and often endorsed by the government, that purports to be the site of origins, continuities, and traditions yet is equally the site of ruptures, fractures and conflicts" (9). This definition already entails the current understanding of what a museum must be – a welcoming and accessible place to observe and contemplate, and to learn inviting us to also question traditional perspectives.

By means of the analysis of museum guidebooks, Black argues that "[t]he museum was an agent of decorum, a dispenser of etiquette", teaching "the crowds not to touch art, what not to bring to a museum, where not to go next in the perfectly laid-out, unfolding order of art" (105). Again we can envision the dichotomy between the initiate and the primitive – those that find in their social genes the competence to appreciate and consume culture versus those whose social class prevents them from properly value and take it in.

Furthermore, so entrenched have these premises become that we can still find this prohibition of touching in 21st-century museums. For example, Classen elicits that the first museum visitors in the 17th and 18th centuries were allowed to touch objects, a common practice in terms of interpretation – "Touch helped bring the museum to life" (903). It was only in the 19th and 20th centuries that the need to forbid touch was felt since the tendency to touch was connected with less dignified attitudes (Neves, *Comunicação Multi-Sensorial* 185), which some authors relate to the intellectualisation of culture that occurred after the spread of the printing press and subsequent democratisation of books, also conducive to oculocentrism or the privilege of sight over other senses (Pallasma v).

For the purpose of this paper, we chose eight museums created until the end of the 19th century in the UK, so as to focus not only on their inception, but also on the practices they developed towards audiences in that century, such as opening hours, admission fees, and other elements of interest, from a broad perspective of accessibility.

1. ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM (1683)

Elias Ashmole founded the museum, mostly based on objects purchased from John Tradescant, the elder and the younger. The museum is known as 'The Ark', their curiosity cabinet that included the mantle of Pocahontas's father, the stuffed body of the last dodo in Europe and Guy Fawkes's lantern. In 1682, Ashmole donated his collection to the University of Oxford – "because the knowledge of Nature is very necessary to human life and health" (cf. official

website). The Ashmolean Museum opened to the public in 1683, a rather controversial decision, and became Britain's first public museum and the world's first university museum. It also housed a chemistry laboratory and rooms for undergraduate lectures.

2. BRITISH MUSEUM (1753)

The British Museum was the first museum to become public in the UK, even before the French Revolution, in 1753, by an Act of Parliament. According to the museum's official website, the initial collection included 71,000 objects owned by Sir Hans Sloane who bequeathed it to King George II, so as to be safeguarded. Later the King added the Old Royal Library to it. The museum opened to the public on 15 January 1759 and was housed in a 17th-century mansion in Bloomsbury, its current location. Entry was free for people who intended to study the collection or simply curious ones.

The 19th century witnessed various architectural changes (e.g. today's quadrangular building), as well as acquisitions and new collections – the Rosetta Stone (1802) is a note-worthy example. As far as visitors are concerned, the numbers are said to have rocketed: "[t]he Museum attracted crowds of all ages and social classes, particularly on public holidays" (cf. official webpage). Because of the increase of visitors along with the development of academic work, the museum invested in "broadening the Museum's appeal through lectures, improving the displays and writing popular guides to the collections" (cf. official webpage).

For Black, the British Museum was emblematic of the "house of muses", "a gentlemen's retreat that for much of the nineteenth century resisted becoming a Victorian or modern museum" (8–9). After the Great Exhibition of 1851, curators had to become receptive to accommodate larger audiences and even the British Museum, "which most doggedly resisted public access" (Black 101), slowly introduced free days: in 1879, Saturdays were free; then, in 1890, every day was free, except for holy days, and "the museum would be open until eight in the evening during the early summer months" (101); in 1894, "portions of its collections would stay open until ten, for it had installed electric light" (101); finally, in 1896, it stayed open on Sundays, as well.

In addition, Griffiths (318, note 95) puts forth that, in accordance with "The public utility of museums" and "Official guide demonstrators" within the Parliamentary Debates, the British Museum started using guides for visits in 1911 and, within 7 months, 11,000 people had taken a tour in the museum; in 1912, 20,000 visitors and, in 1913, 23,000.

3. NATIONAL GALLERY (1824)

In 1824, the House of Commons purchased John Julius Angerstein's collection, which consisted of 38 pictures that were displayed at his house. Its size was ridiculed, when compared to the Louvre, and thus the construction of the National Gallery building at Trafalgar Square (see *Figure 3*) ensued in 1831 that could be accessed by the rich in their carriages and by the poor on foot: "It was felt that in this location the paintings could be enjoyed by all classes in society." (cf. official website). From the beginning, the gallery was open for free and offered extended hours, so that it could be enjoyed by the widest number of visitors.

Until 1869, the site was shared with the Royal Academy of Arts, when this institution moved to its current location in Piccadilly. By 1876, it counted with another seven exhibition rooms, as can be observed in *Figure 3*.

The "Popular Handbook to the National Gallery", from 1888, included information not only about the works of art, but also "the status of the art: the price of acquisitions, the thrilling tale of collecting, and the ranking of the gallery" (Black 105), as well as quotations from British poets. All these resources came forward as a means to instruct the public on art criticism and enhance their experience.

4. SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM (1837)

Sir John Soane acquired several houses in Lincoln's Inn Fields, one of which in 1807 – coaching inns that were to be converted into a museum space. He presented the idea to the Royal
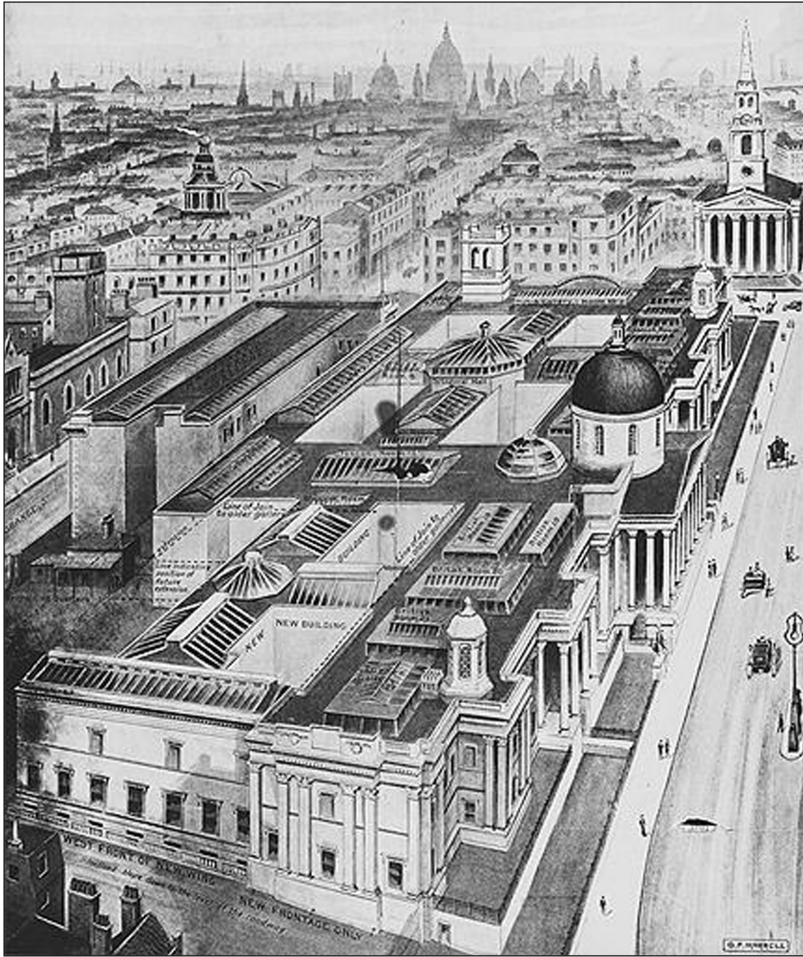
Figure 3 The National Gallery at Trafalgar Square (1910).[7]

Academy of Arts that did not secure support. Soane carried on collecting and displaying his pieces, without categorising them, but rather doing it creatively. Later, after expanding his collection to the adjacent buildings, he opened them to his students, since his purpose had always been educational. Four years before he died, "[i]n 1833, he negotiated an Act of Parliament: to preserve his house and collection, exactly as it would be at the time of his death – and to keep it open and free for inspiration and education." (cf. official website).

In 1837, Sir John Soane's Museum at Lincoln's Inn Fields admitted the public, having c. 64 visitors per day; in 1851, this museum was open for 108 days and attracted 77 visitors a day (Black 100). Anyone could visit, either by applying to the trustee or the curator, or simply at the museum with 1–2 days in advance. Later, the museum would also open on Saturday afternoons and became more and more accessible: by 1890, it would appear in "every cheap printed guidebook in South Kensington (...) along with the British Museum and the National Gallery, as one of the nation's great collections" (100). Soane's ambition was realised: "his museum had become a public institution accessible to the masses" (100).

5. VICTORIA AND ALBERT'S MUSEUM (1857)

The Museum was established, in 1852, after the Great Exhibition of 1851, using its profits to set up what was then called the Museum of Manufactures (including the Museum of Patents as seen in *Figure 4*) and acquire the basis of its collections. Prince Albert "urged the profits of the Exhibition be used to develop a cultural district of museums and colleges in South Kensington devoted to art and science education" (cf. official website). It moved to its current location in 1857, to the 86-acre estate purchased for the Great Exhibition, leading the district to change its name from Brompton to South Kensington, also informally known as 'Albertopolis'. In 1899, it received its final name as the Victoria and Albert Museum, so as to honour the enthusiastic support of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, who laid the foundation stone of a new building designed to give the museum a grand façade and main entrance, concluded only in 1909.

7   Figure taken from the National Gallery's official website: *https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/history/about-the-building/about-the-building?viewPage=5*.

Henry Cole, who was the V&A's first director, upheld that the museum should be "a school for everyone" and, as such:

> Its mission was to improve the standards of British industry by educating designers, manufacturers and consumers in art and science. Acquiring and displaying the best examples of art and design contributed to this mission, but the 'schoolroom' itself was also intended to demonstrate exemplary design and decoration. (cf. V&A's official website)

The director also sustained that in order to teach the masses what "correct design and good taste" (cf. official website) were, they should be presented with its antithesis. Therefore, Cole devised a 'Chamber of Horrors':

> Alongside displays of outstanding furniture, ceramics, textiles, glass and metalwork that would, he hoped, create public demand for "improvements in the character of our national manufactures", visitors were also presented with a Gallery of False Principles. (...) this display of 'bad' design assaulted visitors with a range of what were considered 'utterly indefensible' everyday decorative objects that didn't meet the standards of design that were being formulated and promoted by Cole and his fellow design reformers. (...) The failings of these exhibits were spelled out in the gallery labels, and they were displayed alongside comparative objects which were judged successful and correct. (V&A's official website)

Cole "considered relaxed admissions his greatest achievement: "For the first time in this or any other country working men or the weekly wages class have been enabled equally with the richer classes visiting in the day time to use a Public Museum without sacrificing their daily earnings"" (Black 101). In 1865, the museum put forth "a liberal admission policy", allowing free admission 3 days a week, and "the museum's art schools were open until nine, enabling workers to improve at night, without having to stop working".

As Black (103) puts forth, Cole believed his museum was different from any other public institution, thus his investment in gas lighting from 1858 onwards, which was justified by the amount of work carried out. In 1858, 456,288 people visited the Museum and, until the end of the century, the numbers never dropped below 830,000 visitors, with the exception of 3 years. In order to attract more people to the museum, which was then situated in a suburban area of London, Cole listed train schedules and taxi fares in the museum guides; he set up a library

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8   Figure taken from: *https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/building-the-museum*.

and an artisan school and also the first museum restaurant in the world – "Hungry visitors who found themselves far from the provisions of the city could secure a hot meal" (cf. official website). Moreover, as Black put it, "A trip to the museum was to be a day's excursion" (103).

Such were the masses of people who visited the museum that there were regular newspaper reports on crowds and these demanded management crowd services, namely the police or guards. Apart from this, museums in general were not only "to display art to the public but also teach the public how to receive art" (Black 104), by means of guidebooks and labels "to ensure the ordering of their experience". One more innovation occurred in 1913, when the V&A introduced guides, as stated in the Parliamentary Debates mentioned above (Griffiths 318, note 95).

6. NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY (1859)

The idea for the National Portrait Gallery was introduced to the House of Commons by the hands of Philip Henry Stanhope in 1846. A later attempt was made, but it was only when Stanhope reached the House of the Lords that he made a statement, in 1856, pleading for the establishment of such a gallery: "a gallery of original portraits, such portraits to consist as far as possible of those persons who are most honourably commemorated in British history as warriors or as statesmen, or in arts, in literature or in science" (cf. official website). Months later he ensured a £2000 sum from Queen Victoria for its creation and, on 2 December 1856, it was formally established, being offered the first picture – the Chandos portrait of Shakespeare –, aiming "to promote through the medium of portraits the appreciation and understanding of the men and women who have made and are making British history and culture, and … to promote the appreciation and understanding of portraiture in all media" (cf. official website).

The gallery opened to the public in 1859 and, in 10 years, its visitors soared from 5,300 to 34,500. Between 1870 and 1877, the number of visitors continued its rise from 59,000 to 80,000. When in 1896 it opened in its new building, on St. Martin's Place, it received 4,200 visitors on the first day alone and the numbers kept on escalating, despite an entrance fee of 6 pence on 2 days a week. As a point in case, the first official school visit happened in 1921 (cf. official website).

7. NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM (1881)

The story of the Natural History Museum goes back as far as 1753 when Sir Hans Sloane bequeathed his collection to the British crown and, for this museum's purpose, Sloane's "passion for collecting natural history specimens and cultural artefacts along the way" (cf. official website) was paramount. However, it was only in 1856 that Sir Richard Owen took charge of the natural history collection housed in the British Museum and fought for a separate, dedicated building, since until "the early 1850s, these treasured collections of botany, zoology, geology and mineralogy were housed in cramped quarters in the British Museum in Bloomsbury" (cf. official website). Finally, in 1864, permission was given for the design of a new museum, a task taken over by Alfred Waterhouse, who gave it its distinctive features. Despite its detached building, the Natural History Museum was only renamed as such in 1992, after almost three decades with a separate board of trustees, though still dependent on the British Museum.

Owen insisted that the museum – "a cathedral to nature" – should be free and accessible for everyone and there was even a suggestion for gas to be used in the evenings to allow working people to visit it (cf. official website).

As accounted in the Parliamentary Debates already alluded to (Griffiths 318, note 95), the Natural History Museum introduced guides in 1912.

8. TATE GALLERY (1897)

Henry Tate, an industrialist who made his fortune as a sugar refiner, also a patron of Pre-Raphaelites, donated his collection of 65 paintings to the National Gallery who refused his bequest for lack of suitable conditions. However, with his personal funding along with a campaign launched, the site of the former Millbank Penitentiary (see *Figure 5*) was acquired and would become the new National Gallery of British Art, opening to the public in 1897. It displayed "245 works in eight rooms from British artists dating back to 1790" (cf. official website).
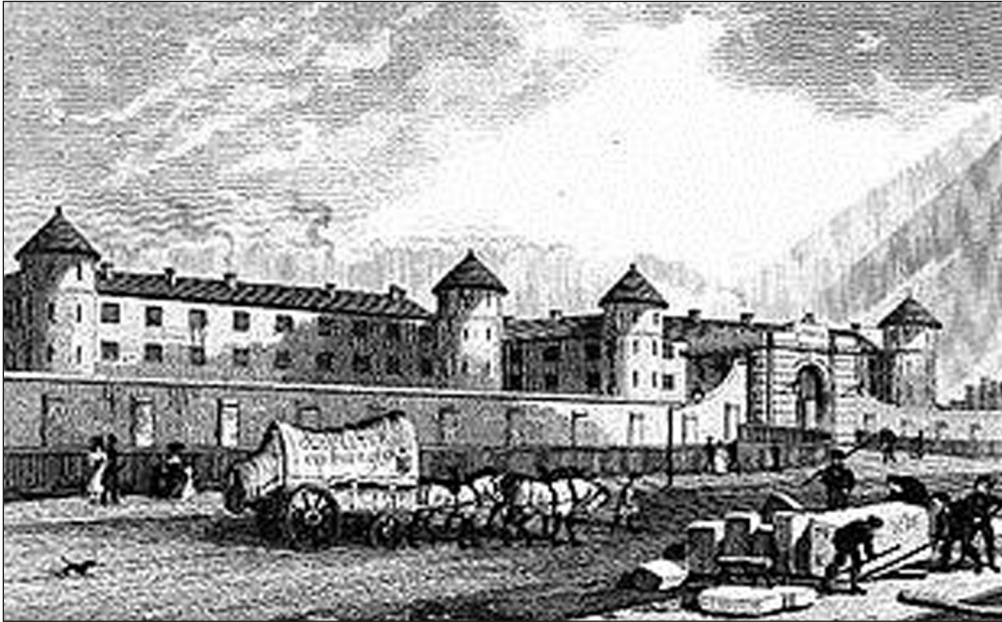
This sample of eight museums ranging from 1683 to 1897 represent some of the first public museums created in the UK and their pursue of a course of action that would enable them to attract larger numbers and more varied audiences.

CONCLUSIONS

> *Whenever a culture travels, it collects. Whenever a culture tours, it appropriates.*
> *(Black 12)*

Public museums are nowadays a common sight in most countries and people from all walks of life can visit them as long as they can afford the admission fee. In this regard, free admission was one of the distinctive features of most of the first British public museums, a policy that was instated in 2001 for all the national museums in the UK.

The assumption underlying this paper consisted of the fact that culture was already a commodity, and thus fetished, in the 19th-century Britain. People would demonstrate this particularly by attending cultural venues as a means to reveal their taste among statused people (Kelly, *Culture as Commodity*), in line with Bourdieu's (*The forms of capital*) conception of cultural and symbolic capitals.

However, for everyone to have access to cultural venues (e.g. museums), it is not enough to find the doors open: one requires background knowledge (what Kelly (*The Socio-Symbolic Role of Museums*) names 'the language of the curator' and Bourdieu (*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*) 'the code'). Moreover, the venues must consider the respect for numerous dimensions of accessibility, especially information accessibility which assumes the creation of exhibition labels and later the provision of human guides. Presently museums also offer audioguides, interactive displays, among many other technological resources. These concerns could find echo in the need to bridge the gap between 'the initiate' and 'the primitive' (Chu), between those who already possess the necessary knowledge gained through socialisation and education and those who lack it and, as a consequence, the means to interpret culture objects in a meaningful, constructive manner.

Therefore, the Victorian Age was defined by a set of conditions favourable to this phenomenon of 'museum culture': first, the underlying intent to brainwash the masses with an imperialist and patriotic spirit, plain in the 1851 Great Exhibition; secondly, Victoria and Albert's plan to educate the taste of the masses (and democratise the masses); and, finally, the museum representing an ally to ward off the fear of a revolution as bloodthirsty as the French Revolution.

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9   Figure taken from *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millbank_Prison*.

A historical overview of museums enabled us to fathom that their every aspect, from the inside of museums to their architecture, will embolden the (in)accessible nature of these spaces. The Galleria degli Uffizi, in Florence (1571), is renowned for the first interpretative labels. With the Enlightenment, other museums followed, namely in Switzerland (1671), in Britain (1683) or in the Vatican (1750). Our focus being the British museums, we opted for a more descriptive approach to eight museums that are reputed for having opened their doors to the public from the second half of the 18th century to the end of the 19th century.

From our selected sample, it was noticeable that most of the museums were concerned with free admission to everyone and with extended hours, so as to enable the working classes to visit after finishing work, thus the investment in gas and electric light. This emphasis on the access for all was particularly visible in the V&A, and Henry Cole's 'schoolroom for everyone', in the Sir John Soane's Museum and in the National History Museum, by the hand of Richard Owen. The V&A stands out as an archetypal case of an accessible museum, since Cole went as far as advertising taxi fares and train schedules in newspapers to aid people who wished to visit the museum. He also set up the first restaurant, a library and an artisan school, and the high turnout of visitors required them to arrange for security services. Guided visits and school tours would only become regular in the 20th century. This understanding is in line with what Neves (*Cultures of Accessibility*) claims, "[t]he moment cultural offerings become a product or a commodity (…), they need positing, packaging, promotion and distribution" (418).

In a nutshell, during the Victorian Age, culture was turning into a valuable commodity and class distinctions were also made on the basis of attending cultural venues, mainly museums, so that the masses might have access to 'the code'. Even if the understanding of 'accessibility for all' was still rather detached from 21st century's perception, the fact remains that the museums described above made an effort to cater for the needs of the working classes and Britain would become a precursor in social accessibility within museums.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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