

The South Kensington Museum in context: an alternative history

Bruce Robertson

*University of California, Santa Barbara**

The South Kensington Museum—now the Victoria and Albert Museum—has a complex history.¹ Founded in 1857 as an omnibus museum of art and industry—a condensation of the Great Exhibition of 1851 in all its abundance—it had a bewildering variety of possible futures ahead of it, including failure (or existence as an adjunct to a café, as one infamous ad campaign suggested twenty years ago).² Yet the history of the museum has generally been written teleologically and typologically, as though it were both inevitable and obvious that it should turn into an art museum. The figure behind this foregone development is Henry Cole (aided by a few of his curators), who is perceived as rather quickly subjugating the conflicting possible directions of the museum to the goal of making art available for the public. I would like to offer a sketch of a different history here, one that sees the context of the museum not in the field of other like museums but in its location, both physical and institutional, on the land owned by the Commissioners of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and in the Education Department.

South Kensington as a museum site came about as a result of the success of the Great Exhibition, which generated such a surplus that the Commissioners were in the position to enact a grander and more permanent vision of education and improvement. The Royal Commission was reaffirmed as a permanent body ‘to increase the means of industrial education and extend the influence of science and art upon productive industry.’³ This plan was very much the vision of Prince Albert, who proposed his first thoughts as early as August 1851 while the Exhibition was still open.⁴ He envisioned, on land not yet bought, a collection of institutions and museums across the whole range of educational endeavour.⁵ To be gathered to South Kensington would be the learned societies funded by the national government, along with the national museums, and a variety of schools, in a grouping that would function as a university or might actually include a university. Some of the proposed institutions included the Geological Society, the Society of Arts, Manufacture, and Commerce, the Zoological Society, the Society of Antiquaries, the National Gallery, and the University of London. There were ninety-six candidates in all.⁶ At the heart of his vision was a notion of useful learning, whether in the physical sciences, engineering, manufacturing or the arts. South Kensington was to be ‘A College of Arts and Manufactures’ (Burton 1999: 43).

Elements of the plan were immediately understood to be impractical, yet the Commissioners held steadfast to the heart of it for the next fifty years; indeed, as they are still in existence, they continue to maintain it. The complex that was ultimately produced followed Albert’s vision closely and is what we see on the site today: a national science university, various professional schools, a group of learned societies, museums that collect virtually everything that can be collected and studied, and places where the useful arts may be displayed. These currently include, to list them briefly: the Natural History Museum (1864); the Science Museum (1909); Royal Albert Hall (1867); Royal College of Organists (1903); Royal College of Music (from 1883); Royal College of Art (from 1857; renamed 1897); Royal School of Needlework (1875); and the Victoria and Albert Museum. I have no doubt missed a few.

Even this bewildering variety conceals a history of other institutions that had a long residence on the site but ultimately moved on (the School of Naval Architecture and Engineering, from 1864 to 1871, when it went to Greenwich; or the gardens of the Royal Horticultural Society, active in the centre of the site from 1861 to 1878; or even the University of London from 1900 to 1936). Others were created by blending together institutions, such as the constituents of Imperial College, which joined in 1907 the Royal College of Science, the Royal School of Mines, and the City and Guilds College, more fully titled the Central Technical College for Instruction in Practical Science of the City and Guilds of London Institute.

The Science Museum in particular conceals within itself many other institutions, such as the Geology Museum (1835); Patent Museum (1857); the Museum of Scientific Instruments (1876), as well as a large element of the original British Museum in Bloomsbury (i.e. the natural history collections). And then there are the others that were either largely dismantled, faded from prominence, or so changed as to be unrecognizable, such as the Museum of Education, the fisheries, food and animal products museums, the National School of Cookery, the School of Art Woodcarving, and the Imperial Institute.

The central concern of all these institutions was education. The Victoria and Albert Museum, seen within this flux, is only an art element in a larger scientific, practical and educational enterprise, just as Prince Albert and Henry Cole first understood it. Albert envisioned a metropolis of learning, organized around the production of useful knowledge and benefiting the entire nation. He saw the benefits of learning based on objects, and the Exhibition of 1851 was simply a first step in waking up the country and the capital to these ideas. Throughout the 1850s, and even before the success of the Great Exhibition, Prince Albert and his circle were making every effort to reform and advance a particular type of practical education in Great Britain. In 1847, Albert was made Chancellor of University of Cambridge, but this did not necessarily mean that university education was the goal to which he was working.⁷ Rather the position was simply one element in a much grander plan that included government commissions on university education, the British Museum and other comparable institutions; reform of the government art schools; and the Great Exhibition.⁸ His particular interest lay science and technology, but there was no notion at this time that higher practical education - particularly its technical or industrial side - had to be located in a university. As late as 1877, for example, Thomas Huxley, one of the great reformers of science education in Britain, argued that technical scientific education should be most fruitfully allied to the appropriate factory where the skill would be utilized.⁹ Being interested in reforming and developing a cadre of students, teachers and researchers in chemistry, for example, didn't necessarily mean that the end result should be a university. It might just as easily be an independent body of some kind, or a museum, as it was the case of the Royal College of Chemistry, largely founded by Albert in 1845, which was administered within the purview of the Museum of Practical Geology on Jermyn Street until 1872. Cole himself was actively interested in building laboratories in his buildings for the Department of Science and Art from 1867 onwards; that is the reason why Huxley moved his classes and laboratories there in 1871 (Forgan and Gooday 1996: 445). Moreover, it is important to remember that virtually Huxley's entire professional career lay in the service of the Department of Science and Art, from 1854, working literally next door to Cole and under his purview in the South Kensington Museum building. From 1872, Huxley could walk under cover from his laboratory into the Museum's art galleries.

Not just science education but the whole structure of the national education enterprise in Britain, until at least 1899 when the Board of Education was formed, was a virtually indescribable hybrid of half-reformed traditions and innovations. The issues of institutional structure, as well as ideology, remained tantalizingly complex throughout the nineteenth century, with at least seven competing national offices having authority over different aspects of education, which were then administered at a local level by a bewildering variety of local boards and governmental authorities.¹⁰

These abstract issues of social organization, nonetheless, required concrete structures. The first great difficulty in developing national educational and cultural institutions throughout this period was the lack of appropriate spaces in which to put them. The opening of the National Gallery in 1836 had had the immediate result of making available considerable space in the one general government office building, Somerset House.¹¹ A flurry of rearrangement ensued, led by the University of London and the School of Design, both newly created and both moving into the space left behind by the Royal Academy of Arts when it removed to one wing of the National Gallery. As a result, both the University and the School were yoked together for a century in the eyes of the government. But no new buildings were created for national cultural institutions until the South Kensington Museum was built in 1857.¹² In part, the need to build such a structure at that juncture was almost forced on the government: the spaces in Somerset House used by these bodies were appropriated by Customs and the Treasury in 1853, which led to an evacuation to Marlborough House, which had become available in 1849 on the death

of Queen Adelaide. But Marlborough House in turn was due to be remodelled for possession by the young Prince of Wales's household in 1859. The South Kensington Museum opened simultaneously with the move to Burlington House (bought by the government with rare foresight in 1854) of many of the groups camping in Marlborough House. From this perspective, the 1850s were a difficult, even perilous period for these cultural and scholarly societies and institutions: their locations and their futures were unclear.

The Prince and his advisors understood this problem clearly and tried to use it to their advantage. The first plans for South Kensington included housing for a university, the National Gallery, and homes for the learned societies. One such draft plan, submitted by Cole and Richard Redgrave on February 20th 1854, includes the Patent Museum, a Royal Academy of Music, a normal industrial school, art galleries, Society of Arts, the University of London and an examination hall with an extension for the display of prints and drawings, with a railway terminus opposite to bring the public to it. To one side of the Patent Museum would be 'a testing ground for experiments.' The arrangement was similar (not counting the new facilities for science) to the gathering of learned bodies and schools at Somerset House twenty years before. In another version of the plan, the National Gallery was to be moved to the site and sit between colleges of industrial arts and sciences and the houses for the societies and professional men.¹³ Although obviously nothing came of it, there was agitation in the press throughout the 1850s about the need to move the Gallery's pictures to the more healthful air of South Kensington, encouraged by the members of Albert's circle.¹⁴

But two strong objections obstructed, or seemed to obstruct these elaborate plans. The first was the complaint that the site was too far for the great mass of public to get there, let alone the professional men and societies; this distance would be felt well into the twentieth century. Just as emphatic was the expression of an anti-German or anti-rationalizing feeling. As an anonymous author argued:

As for the scheme of bringing all the art collections under one roof, or in one institution, it is a Bedlamite delusion, founded upon an incapacity to distinguish between the wants of our huge city and those of a little German town which a flea could circumscribe in forty jumps. With us, accessibility and diffusion are the great needs. A Germanico-Laputa College of Everything at one extremity of our metropolis... would make John Bull, who paid for it, look the most demented donkey in all Christendom.

In the end, no older institutions moved to South Kensington and most of the Somerset group ended up in Burlington House together. But as in any new ecological niche, new organisms developed that mimicked the functions and goals of the old ones. So for example, while the National Gallery did not move, the South Kensington Museum immediately acquired both paintings and picture galleries, in the form of the Sheepshanks Gallery (the first permanent structure to be built on the site) which opened in 1857, followed quickly the Turner and Vernon Collections, which had been exhibited in Marlborough House. In addition, the National Portrait Gallery was located at South Kensington from 1865 to 1885, when it relocated to Bethnal Green (administratively a South Kensington institution).

Because of this initial refusal by established institutions, historians have seen the Museum under the direction of Henry Cole as free to become itself, independent of other institutions, a model for art museums around the world. But throughout the nineteenth century, the South Kensington Museum was never a *museum* in any modern understanding of the term. Typically the heart of the *museum* function has been seen to be the acquisition, safeguarding and utilization of a permanent collection. But this was not the only priority or even the major priority of Cole's institution until the very end of the nineteenth century. And even when one focuses on the collections, the image of the South Kensington Museum as quickly becoming an art museum is difficult to maintain. But in any case, the first priority was education; so long as Cole was alive, the institution never wavered from this goal, because it was administratively merely an element of the Department of Science and Art. In a typical report Annual Report of the Department, in 1877, for example, four years after Cole retired, the priorities of the institution he had headed were listed as follows: first came the instruction

in science in industry; second came drawing and fine arts as applied to industry. Only then come the museums: South Kensington, Bethnal Green and others (including Geology); then the Geological Survey and finally various learned institutes and societies. Cole's institutional priorities, as articulated by the Department he headed, were first instruction (and in science before art) and only then museums.

The educational nature of the Museum defined it in fundamental ways. For example, the Museum's unique relationship to the government derived from its central role in education. Unlike the British Museum or the National Gallery, which had independent boards of trustees, the South Kensington Museum was a department of government. But even this statement is not quite accurate: the Museum was an element of an educational program that was a department of the government. The museum grew out of the activities of the School of Design and was derived from the collections used to support the School's teaching. The School of Design had been established in 1836, in response to the work of a Select Committee on the arts of design and the Royal Academy's teaching function.¹⁶ It reported to the Board of Trade and in 1837 opened in Somerset House. The creation of the School was part of a larger program of government interest in education (indeed, part of the larger liberal program of reform): the University of London was also formed in 1836 and in 1839 the first government body was established to administer elementary education, the Committee of the Privy Council on Education. When Cole, fresh from the triumph of the 1851 Exhibition, was charged with reforming the School of Design, it became part of a newly formed Department of Practical Art in 1852, under the Board of Trade. In 1856, the Department of Science and Art, as it was now named, was transferred to the Privy Council, under the Committee of Council for Education. This Committee had two bodies reporting to it: the Department of Education responsible for primary school education and the Department of Science and Art. In other words, while it is true that for most visitors, how a museum is administratively structured is largely irrelevant to the experience, administrative structures can go a long way towards determining institutional priorities. One has only to think of the horrified reaction today to the trend of putting development and money people in charge of museums, rather than scholars, to suggest a contemporary parallel. Most critics are convinced that art museums not run by an art historian is visibly different from one run by the holder of a business degree, although there is no evidence to suggest the truth of this.

As a result, the South Kensington Museum, unlike the British Museum (which was deeply distrustful of the public good for most of the nineteenth century) and the National Gallery (founded on the principle that high art magically transforms its audience into better people), was committed to the notion of purposeful educational activities directed consciously to its audiences. In other words, the South Kensington Museum was a school that had a collection to which the public was also admitted. In reality it was two schools: art and science. Cole was in charge of only one side of the Department of Science and Art initially. He shared power with Dr. Lyon Playfair, a prominent chemist, who was responsible for the science side. Both men had deputies: on the art side, the artist Richard Redgrave, and on the science side, an engineer, Major-General John Donnelly. Playfair left the Department in 1856 and Cole became sole head, with both Donnelly and Redgrave under him; later, when Cole retired in 1873, Donnelly became sole head.¹⁷ The Science schools would not leave the South Kensington Museum site until 1900, though they got their own purpose-built building in 1872; even then they only moved across the street. The Science and Art Department finally combined with the body above it, the Committee of Council for Education, becoming the Board of Education in 1899. Only then would the art schools, the science schools and the museum be (almost fully) disentangled.¹⁸ It is worth remembering that the Museum, in its upper floors and nether reaches, crawled with students—thousands of them—and many of them in the public galleries as well. All building projects on the entire site owned by the Commissioners, until 1900, involved input from faculty and students as to the design and execution of decorative schemes.¹⁹

Because the idea that it was once possible to conceive of science education taking place alongside art education seems fanciful, this element of the Victoria and Albert Museum's history has largely been ignored. The world of Victorian technical education seems disconnected from the modern laboratory science and training in modern universities; and

thus it seems justifiable to discount the importance and value of this history. Modern art schools, on the other hand, are recognizably similar to their predecessors - the bohemian spirit and paint-spattered atmosphere have not changed. Yet the physical changes in laboratories disguise a similarly close relationship to their Victorian predecessors. The critical changes are not really the physical and technological ones, although most scientists would heartily disagree, but ones of institutional location: today, the training of scientists and primary thrust of science research is contained within universities, although there are many independent research laboratories; in the nineteenth just the reverse was true. But there is no necessary reason why today's university model is more progressive or correct than other possibilities. It should be remembered that the essential task of a university is not to educate but to give a bachelor's or master's degree. Without being facetious about it, this is the unique difference between a university and all other educational enterprises, many of which have very similar modes of training (or did in the nineteenth century), with professors, students, classrooms and specialized learning spaces. A vivid example of this simple distinction is provided by the University of London, which was not a teaching university until 1900; its primary function before then was to give degrees, to give university recognition to education achieved by many other means than going to university classrooms. So it was perfectly reasonable for Prince Albert and Cole to imagine the South Kensington Museum functioning as a college of arts and manufacture, modelled on the *Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers*, just as it was reasonable for Albert to found the leading program for advanced training in chemistry within a museum. As Forgan and Gooday write: 'There was, therefore, still a period in mid-nineteenth century Britain when the museum rather than the laboratory, was the center of scientific authority' (Forgan and Gooday 1994: 160).

In the changing world of university education in Britain in this period (as elsewhere), we first see the contours of modern academic disciplines emerging, led by developments in the sciences. For example, the first moves to establish new bachelors degrees came not in the arts but in science. In 1858 Thomas Huxley's *Memorial* addressed to the University of London and signed by the most prominent men in British science, urged the reform of science education and argued for a new degree to recognize this new educational model; a year later the University of London responded by establishing the new degree, the BSc.²⁰ Cole did not have a university degree and may have been hostile to the claims of privilege of university degree holders. Nonetheless, his entire career was deeply enmeshed with the University of London: as soon as he gained his kingdom in 1852, he had to share its quarters with it. Always competitive, Cole had not forgotten the University since the abandoned attempt to move it to his site. In 1861, he explored the possibility of establishing a degree in the Department, in Science of Mining, to be awarded by the University of London.²¹ This may have been prompted by his first impulse to memorialize the Prince who had died earlier that year: to establish an 'Albert University' for awarding degrees in technology and industry.²² Nothing came of it at that time, but the demands of the science schools to be taken seriously remained alive. Thomas Huxley moved into Cole's physical domain in 1872, after negotiations with Cole and Donnelly beginning in 1869. Cole repeatedly touted the competition his institution constituted for universities. In 1879, for example, when the India Office collections were turned over, he proclaimed: 'There is no university in the world where one can learn so much about India' (Boynton and Burton 2003: 244).

Just as the University continued to be relevant to Cole, so did his proximity to other learned bodies that had shared space with the Schools of Design at one point or another. As soon as the museum opened it began to interact with the very societies that seemed to have spurned it. Immediately after the museum opened on June 22nd 1857, it was made available to learned societies in the evenings, who quickly made use of its gas lit and accessible spaces. The strongest connections lay between the schools and the collections. This merging of functions continued throughout the century (and no doubt still occurs). The Treasury Committee of 1889 had argued that the science museum and science schools needed to be 'in direct contiguity with one another—for the reason that the Instruments and Museum Specimens exhibited in one have to be used by the Professor and students in the other.' University exams were held in the Science Museum as late as 1911. Conversely, the Indian section of the Museum lent canopies and draperies to the Royal College of Arts, the

Royal College of Science in the 1880s and 1890s, and there are many other similar instances of lending from one institution to another.²³ Most importantly, however, as noted above, during Cole's tenure and even later, every structure that went up on the Commissioner's site, was decorated by the students and teachers of the art schools, who had developed their skills from the examination of originals and models in the Museum's collections.

The multiple nature of the Museum was immediately evident to every visitor, even to the most uninformed. The building was a harum-scarum of different elements: from the temporary iron 'boilers' to the galleries tacked on to them. Even as Cole managed to get more substantial galleries and offices built, the spaces remained a hodge-podge. The traces of this hybrid origin remain, as one tries to navigate through the building today. Even if everything in the museum is labelled 'art' the V & A will always look like many museums, and never one museum. And the question of what is 'art' is one that the collections still raise today: the experience of walking through the costume exhibition halls on the way to Raphael cartoons should stretch anyone's notion of the category to the snapping point. The dissonance was even stronger when the museum was founded.

Anthony Burton has written the most thorough and fascinating study of this history, dating the growth of the collections from the moment the School of Design was first established in 1835; but his is a history of the art collections. It is important to remember that what was actually created at the South Kensington Museum when it opened was a building that contained multiple museums: the Museum of Ornamental Art and the Sheepshanks Gallery, but also the Patent Museum, the Museum of Animal Products, the Food Collection, the Museum of Construction and the Educational Museum, as well as the short lived Economic Museum and a few other odds and ends. All these collections grew through purchase and gift at staggering rates. The results could be extreme. Fish hatcheries were active in the building, on second floor, and the 'runs' were announced in the newspapers. As late as 1866, one could go to the South Kensington Museum and see salmon and trout hatch, on the way to look at Turner's pictures, having just perused the latest medieval acquisitions. Nor were these elements of the collection unpopular: the number of visitors to scientific exhibits increased from 150,000 in 1884 to 260,000 in 1888, for example (Port 1995: 51). In 1860, Cole testified that after the picture collection, the food museum was the most popular attraction (Bonython and Burton 2003:196).

The art collections are, of course, the evolutionary successful collections in what is now the Victoria and Albert Museum, but the others that left the building were not always failures (even the food collection led to the development of national cookery training programs).²⁴ To suggest this would be like saying the natural history collections of the British Museum are a failure because they are no longer at the parent institution. The heterogeneous collections lingered together for a very long time, both administratively and literally. Once a collection has entered the container of a museum it is extraordinarily hard to eradicate it entirely; object collections are like certain noxious plants that send out runners and pop up throughout a garden. The Patent Museum, which always had a problematic relationship to the South Kensington Museum (Burton 1999: 45), was part of the fabric of Cole's empire until 1883 but did not become part of the new Science Museum until the latter institution was founded in 1893; the Science Museum did not move into its new buildings until the 1920s.²⁵ The Education Collection was not dispersed until 1888—and even then the last of the material was not transferred out until 1897. The Food and Animal Products Museums, while they left South Kensington in 1872, only moved to Bethnal Green, which remained administratively under the control of the South Kensington Museum. The present and seemingly absolute clarification between the two sides of Exhibition Road—Art to the East and Science to the West—only occurred in 1899, and even then, the Victoria and Albert Museum, as we know it today (more or less) did not open until 1906, just short of fifty years after its first building opened. The final element of the Victoria and Albert's art collections—the Indian material—did not move east across the street until 1955. While the head and staff of each museum might perceive their institutions as separate and distinct, this has never been the understanding of the general public, nor of the 1851 Commissioners: the art museum was always part of a museum complex.²⁶

Despite this history, one could argue that the growth of the size of the art acquisition budget would seem proof that Cole was devoting most of the resources of the Museum to the arts.²⁷ In 1880, for example, the South Kensington Museum spent £1,000 on science specimens, £6,000 on art and £1,000 on art specimens. But it also spent £4,500 on scientific research. Comparably, at the British Museum, £2,850 was spent on science specimens, while £3,880 was spent on things like antiquities, prints and drawings, and £7,700 was spent on printed books. In other words, in a museum with a far greater history of dedication to science, only three times as much was spent on science specimens. Over the decade the amounts changed slightly but the ratios did not. In 1889, the science budget for acquisitions at the South Kensington Museum was £2000 while the art budget was £10,000. In comparison, the British Museum had an acquisitions budget of £21,900, which seems enormous until one realizes that the bulk of the money went for library purchases (some £12,000). The National Gallery had the identical acquisitions budget as the South Kensington Museum for art. The Natural History Museum, now separate from the British Museum, had an acquisitions budget of £4,700—still the same ratio as before. Several lessons might be drawn from these figures. First, the value attached to each national institution's collecting program remained relatively unchanged across time. The South Kensington Museum's art collections were valued as much as the National Gallery's; its science specimens, on the other hand, were valued at about one third the cost of the natural history collections of the British Museum. The historical reasons for this difference may be located in the greater antiquity of the British Museum, and the well-established cultural and social value of natural history collections.²⁸ But the important thing is that the science acquisition budget for the South Kensington Museum does not decline in relation to the art acquisition budget. Moreover, art 'specimens' simply cost more than scientific specimens: just as today, only a few paintings can be bought for the same amount of money that one can acquire tens of thousands of insects or birds.

Differences in operating costs between the two divisions of art and science also fail to reveal a comparative neglect of science. In 1870 the government spend was £88,375 for the operating costs of the British Museum, and a staggering £206,453 for the Department of Science and Art. But this large cost included all the art schools around the nation. Nonetheless, the operating budgets of the museum and its art acquisition were only a small drop in the bucket of what Cole was responsible for. The operating budgets also reveal very little about any difference in importance between the two divisions, because of the very different history of arts and science education in Britain. Public arts teaching aimed at teaching young people to become skilled workers had a long history in Britain, consolidated by the government schools of design in 1836.²⁹ In the developed scheme whereby the School of Design became an element of a Department under the Board of Trade, Richard Redgrave administered a group of schools and teacher training programs that lay scattered across the nation. No similar pre-history existed for science education; the closest equivalent lay in the private Mechanics Institutes that had sprung up all over the kingdom a generation earlier. But these Institutes taught adults how to improve themselves, not adolescents, and this is the model that Playfair developed; the Department did not run science schools—yet. The Art Department typically taught thousands of students at the Museum to become artists, as well as scores of others to become art teachers, in addition to administering schools nationwide. In 1864, for example it ran ninety art schools with some 16,000 students, and art teachers trained by the Department taught some 70,000 students. In contrast, the Science Department taught fewer than 6,500 students nationwide (directly or indirectly), taught only 70 teachers, and administered no schools; at South Kensington it taught fewer than 600 students to the Art Department's 16,000.³⁰ But this paltry beginning and slow development should not blind us to the methodically planned success of the science program. By 1900, even though the number of art schools administered by the Art Department had expanded to almost three hundred, this does not match the scale of resources devoted by the government at the same date to the foundation of Imperial College of Science.³¹

The zealous attention that Cole and Playfair both paid to reforming art and science education fall well within the history of educational reform in Britain throughout this period (Roach 1986). Their ideological cast was Utilitarian and Socialist, reflecting the influence of both Jeremy Bentham and Robert Owen. Cole, in particular, was a Utilitarian in philosophy,

inspired by his close friendship with John Stuart Mill, whom he met at the age of 18. As his most recent biographers insist, Cole's career may be read as one successful Utilitarian project after another (Boynthon and Burton 2003: 35, 37).³² His first success was the reform and rationalization of the Public Record Office; from there he quickly moved on to the creation of the penny post, the reform of industrial design, the Great Exhibition and so on. His success in reordering of the curriculum of art education in Britain along a single system might be compared to his friend and fellow Utilitarian, Edwin Chadwick's reform of the Poor Laws, a single system that regulated both the dispensing and receiving of charity.³³ The collections of art were always at the service of education: their role was strictly utilitarian. Indeed they were programmatically so. During Cole's lifetime, and for some time afterwards, every building project on the larger South Kensington site owned by the Commissioners became a laboratory and demonstration piece for the work of the students and teachers of the School of Design. They were responsible for executing the decoration schemes of all the temporary buildings of the Exhibition of 1862, the permanent buildings that replaced them, Albert Hall, and many other structures. In other words, the art collection was never idle: it was collected, studied in formal classes by enrolled students, and then expressed in public design at a national site for the good of the nation. Every aspect of it was experimental.³⁴ While very soon after the museum was opened, it could be said to contain masterpieces by some of the greatest artists of the medieval and modern Europe, these masterworks were embedded in a collection and a set of activities and aesthetic decisions that were ultimately made manifest in classrooms and galleries and homes. As Donnelly testified in 1873 to the Select Committee investigating the relations between the British Museum and the South Kensington Museum: 'The collections at South Kensington are not for self-instruction, but are essentially the apparatus for teaching.'³⁵ What Cole had declared should be the purpose of Schools of Design in 1848 may also said to be his vision for the museum:

If it be made a condition, as my proposal supposed, that the design must be useful, and its use is guaranteed, the course of instruction will become self-acting as it were, for it cannot halt at any stage before realizing successful design. There is no escape from doing the right thing.³⁶

But this is merely a sketch of an analysis of the Utilitarian and Reform nature - the political nature-of the South Kensington Museum. As Brian Simon makes forcefully clear in his discussion of British education in this period, we may understand the museum as in some sense just one aspect of the various restructured knowledge systems that were created in response to the stresses produced by the social upheaval of industrialization (Simon 1987: 88-110).

It is perfectly valid to argue that Cole was more interested in art than science—and in any case, he could not have supervised or developed the science schools because he had no training in science.³⁷ But it should also be argued that Cole was most interested in education and reform, and perhaps in the deployment of power. With this in mind, the demands and prestige of science were never out of his mind. But the relative social power and value of science has not entered the calculations of most art historians. The role of Lyon Playfair is a perfect example of this one-sidedness.³⁸ Playfair (1818-1898), in histories of the Victoria and Albert Museum, is generally seen as a failure, someone who left the scene too early (1856) to have any impact on the institution. In histories of British science, however, he is one of its most influential players and successes. Playfair was instrumental in the development of German chemical methods in Britain. This is important because the advances made in chemistry in Germany, both in the science and the teaching of it, were fundamental to the industrial development of that country—and to Britain. In 1846 he became the chemist for the geological survey, and thus under the purview of the Geological Museum (which would soon be allied with the Department of Science and Art). His interest in science and training in Germany made him a natural ally of Prince Albert; he was one of the commissioners of the Great Exhibition and ultimately became Secretary of the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851, from 1883 to 1889.³⁹ He left the Department of Science and Art to become professor of chemistry at Edinburgh, and in 1868 became a Member of Parliament, holding the Scottish universities seat; he retained a seat in Parliament until 1892.

It is from this seat of power, and many others in both government and the royal household, that he was able give to his last direct service for the South Kensington Museum, when he suggested that the museum be completed in honour of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 1897.

But like Cole, Playfair was most interested in educational reform, and like Cole, in the blurring of the distinction between fine art and science. As he said to a group in Birmingham in 1870:

Science is the progeny of the industrial arts on the one side, and on the other, of the experiences and perceptions which gradually attach themselves to these arts... the evolution of science from the arts.⁴⁰

Most importantly, Playfair was an instrumental player in a series of educational Commissions that studied the future of science education and which ultimately successfully created the Imperial College of Science, founded in 1898. This institution, which was implicit in the plans for South Kensington from 1851, soon dwarfed the art schools. Playfair's legacies in South Kensington are the Science Museums and the Imperial College, arguably as successful and prominent as the V & A.

The Commission that established the Imperial College of Science also brought the headquarters of the University of London to the site, where it would remain for over thirty years. At the turn of the last century, then, the Prince's vision might be said to be complete. The South Kensington Museum had become nested in a collection of institutions that included a university, a practical college of science, and a host of other institutions. But its creation as a separate institution should be understood more as a sort of cleaning up loose ends, than the triumphant conclusion of a story foretold from its foundation nearly fifty years before. Indeed the editorial (probably by Cole) that summarized the achievements of South Kensington in 1871 could continue to describe it thirty years later:

South Kensington, incomplete as it is, has already done enough to stamp its character and insure the success of its destiny. What has been done? South Kensington has created buildings, marking a new epoch in architecture... has established gardens...has instituted a new Museum for the Arts and Sciences which millions consult and frequent, and to which is allied more than a thousand schools and classes for teaching the sciences and the arts bearing on productive industry.⁴¹

It is possible to read the history of the South Kensington Museum, not as a steady progress toward a museum of decorative arts and design, but as a bazaar or emporium, with new products arriving and departing all the time. The ultimate rationalization of the various museums can just as easily be understood as a rationalization of schools and their attendant collections, with the sciences placed on the west side of Exhibition Road because of Imperial College - or because that was where the real estate was. Supermarkets and department stores have the same problems of categorization, product lines and space. The larger goal of this rereading of the V & A's history, however, is to destabilize our notion of what a normative museum was in the nineteenth century. It needs to be remembered that nineteenth-century museums are not twentieth-century museums, no more than what museums were twenty years ago is any predictor of what they will become in this new century. The Museum, in Cole's vision, was never just a container that staged programs. It was an educational force that deployed material collections. This is the vision of South Kensington that was so attractive in the United States and throughout the Empire. What was copied by museums like the Metropolitan in New York was not South Kensington's type of collecting, but its usefulness, its educational vision.

More largely speaking, this history should demonstrate the danger of typological histories. The Victoria and Albert becomes a modern "art museum" only at the point at which we start calling such museums modern art museums, which is well into the twentieth century. To be sure, there are any number of museums that are like the V & A, but none of them are exactly like it. While it is generally useful to think of such museums together, as fundamentally alike, it is also profitable to disaggregate them and think of them in terms of their location. Here is the other lesson to be learnt from this brief survey: that the physical and social/political

context offer equally important information as an internal history of a museum's development. Locating the V & A in two spaces - the South Kensington site developed by the Commissioners of the Exhibition of 1851, and the national educational landscape - underscores both the contingencies of its development and its relationship to other comparable educational activities. Locating the V & A within a political space - the increasing governmental interventions in education, beginning in the 1830s and continuing to today - also places the V & A within the field of the other institutions that Henry Cole and others understood his Museum to play, particularly the universities. Untangling that story, however, is a very difficult one, since no one has yet written a satisfactory account of the British government's overriding interest in the nineteenth century in education from childhood through adulthood, from the arts to the sciences, from culture industry to agricultural industry.⁴² This is, I would argue, is the most interesting location of the Victoria and Albert Museum, then and now.

Notes

¹ The standard histories are Burton (1999); Baker and Richardson, eds., (1997); Physick (1982) and Survey of London (1975). Critical for this study, and a starting point for my argument, are a pair of articles: Forgan and Gooday (1994) and Forgan and Gooday (1996). See also Port (1995).

² In 1874, dissatisfaction with Cole and his legacy was so high that the museum was almost divided between the British Museum and the National Gallery. See Burton (1999: 97).

³ Supplemental Charter, 1851, quoted in 'Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851: an outline of its activities past and Present' (1997: 2). Privately published.

⁴ Recent biographies of Albert include Hobhouse (1983), James (1984) and Weintraub (1997).

⁵ See Hobhouse (1983: 110); Shepherd (1975: 81); Burton (1999: 41-45).

⁶ *Second Report of HM Commission of the Exhibition of 1851*, (1852:14).

⁷ See also the comments in Hobhouse, on military education (Hobhouse 1983: 52-53), address to the National Education Conference (1857: 63-64) and universities in England and Ireland (65-68).

⁸ The list of commissions is very long, easily a dozen or more, beginning with the House of Commons Select Committee on School of Design 1849. See Morton (1997). So long as Albert's generation of helpers remained in power, exhibitions, museums and schools worked together on the South Kensington site. Indeed, in some ways, the Imperial Institute, which replaced the exhibitions area on the site, might be seen as a permanent form of international exhibition.

⁹ See Forgan and Gooday (1996:456) and Forgan and Gooday (1994: 139-62). See also Pickstone (2000) and Cardwell (1972). A useful survey can be found in Argles (1851).

¹⁰ For an excellent guide to this complexity, see Morton (1997).

¹¹ The National Gallery building had been approved in 1832; the Houses of Parliament competition in 1835. The British Museum was being built from 1823 until 1846.

¹² With the sole exception of the Museum of Economic Geology, which moved into its own building in Jermyn Street in 1848. Port gives an excellent brief summary of these issues (Port 1995: 84).

¹³ Other more elaborate plans were proposed as well. See for example the publication of a letter from J. C. Robinson to Lord Elcho in the *Athenaeum*, March 27, 1858, proposing the following rationalization: 1. British Museum: the Library, antiquities, vases, gems and coins; Egyptian material, with everything else removed; 2. Trafalgar Square: remove the Royal Academy and place old master paintings and drawings and engravings; with portraits either here or at Burlington House; 3. Kensington: all scientific, purely educational, industrial and technological collections; the British Museum's ethnography; modern art; medieval; ornamental or industrial art; oriental art; 4. Burlington House: Royal Academy.

¹⁴ (see Press Clippings, National Institutions 52/30 V & A Archives). The Royal Academy and the National Gallery were both fighting for the same space in the National Gallery building, from 1850. See Hutchison (1968: 113).

¹⁵ Atlas, July 5 p. 41, in V & A Press clippings National Institutions 52/30 June 1855-December 1856.

¹⁶ The standard history is still Bell (1963).

¹⁷ The Museum received its first full-time director then as well, Philip Cunliffe Owen. But the Science Museum directorship was not separated from the art museum's until 1893.

¹⁸ Indeed, there was a rearguard parliamentary action as late as 1898 to keep the science and art collections together (Physick 1982: 206).

¹⁹ See Survey of London throughout.

²⁰ See Harte (1986: 109-11).

²¹ Cole Diary, 6 July 1861, National Art Library, V & A. He also forwarded a letter from the Museum of Economic Geology and its director, Roderick Murchison (one of the signatories of Huxley's *Memorial*, Huxley's boss, and someone who technically reported to Cole in the Department), to his superiors.

²² Cited in Survey, p. 148.

²³ Nominal file, Imperial College, Imperial Institute and Science Museum; filed with Precis of Board Minutes, V & A. The Education Department bought items and allocated them to the science or art collections into the 1940s.

²⁴ In the most complete study of the whole site, the science collections are still characterized as being "gradually expelled" from the Museum throughout the 1880s to make room for the growth and popularity of the art collections. Survey of London, p. 248. This disregards the corresponding success of the science collections a few years later. See Burton's useful summary of the different collection's fates (Burton 1999: 56, n. 113).

²⁵ For an excellent survey of this confused history, see Survey of London (1975) chapter 19: 249-254.

²⁶ In Humberstone (1907). Humberstone thinks of South Kensington as a unified site under the direction of the Science and Art Department (formerly board of trade and now privy council), under the theme of 'educational and scientific work'. He lumps together the V & A as simply one institution along with all the others.

²⁷ See the relevant annual volumes of Estimates for Civil Service General Abstract of the Grants to be Proposed for the Civil Services.

²⁸ An article in the Daily News (31 August 1860; V & A Press Clippings) reports that the public love the bird specimens most because the brightness of the plumage is 'calculated to attract and amuse the spectators.' They are more intelligible to the working classes and inspire the middle classes to form their own collections, and even some of the "Whig class." The Times originally expressed this opinion, April 19, 1860.

²⁹ For the history before Cole, see Bell (1963).

³⁰ 1866 Annual Report, Department of Science and Art, (p. 7)

³¹ Rafael Cardoso Denis takes a very different view of these budget figures, arguing that Cole fairly quickly siphoned off money from the schools to run the museum (Denis 1997: 112). I would argue that Denis fails to place the slow development of the science schools in particular, but also the art schools, in the context of the changes in British education as a whole. During this period, there was still an ongoing debate as to what would be most effective: teaching science and art to students, or teaching teachers to teach science. See in particular Cardwell (1972). Also, Hurt (1971); Mueller, Ringer and Simon (1987).

³² Cole knew not only J. S. Mill, but also such important political reformers as Thomas Spring Rice and Edwin Chadwick, who was at the centre of much of the social reform from the 1830s (particularly the Poor Laws) and was his boarder for awhile. Cole was a founding member of the Reform Club.

³³ See Mary Poovey's interesting discussion of Chadwick (Poovey 1995: chapter 5). Her description of Chadwick's characteristic mode of operation is amusingly like Cole's: court public opinion in the press, pack Royal commissions, and control local organizations (Poovey 1995: 110).

³⁴ See also Cole's comments describing the institution's plans and achievements in 1856 and 1857. Boynton and Burton (2003: 177,182-3).

³⁵ Report of the Committee, 1873, p. 9. See also Redgrave's testimony, that in order to graduate art students were tested on their knowledge of museum objects, both by presenting copies of them and by answering questions about them. The better students etched copies which were for sale (p. 14).

³⁶ Quoted in Boynton and Burton (2003:107). Similarly his plan to include patent reform, so as to create a complete system of education and rewards. p. 109.

³⁷ But characteristic of his attitude is his description in his 1842 guidebook to Westminster Abbey as 'a perfect museum of illustrations of the Technical Arts, from Edward the Confessor to the present time.' Quoted in Boynton and Burton (2003: 82-83). One might also point out Cole's use of both modern artists and the paintings of old masters to illustrate children's books: fine art put in the service of education. One could, I think, argue that Cole's use of objects and, indeed, his characterization of virtually every aspect of the museum, were deliberately staged in opposition to the use of objects and relationship to the public and the government of the British Museum and the National Gallery. It must be acknowledged, at the same time, that the work of such curators as J. C. Robinson, undercut Cole's work. At the South Kensington Museum then, as at the Victoria and Albert Museum today, there was an ambiguity of purpose, between a notion of pragmatic usefulness and the transcendence of the masterpiece. This contradiction is not unique to the South Kensington Museum, of course. It is felt even internally, in curatorial acquisitions, between the canonical representative work and the extraordinary example.

³⁸ For his biography see J. G. Crowther (1965) and Cardwell (1972) *passim*.

³⁹ Indeed, Bell credits Playfair with the original suggestion for a school and a museum at South Kensington, while Cole wanted a university (Bell 1963: 247). The Prince opened a new building for the Geology Museum and the College of Chemistry, where Playfair worked, in the same month he opened the Exhibition, Crowther (1965: 206).

⁴⁰ 'The Inoculation of the Arts and Sciences', [an address in 1870 to the Birmingham Midland Institute], *Subjects of Social Welfare* (1889: 197-224).

⁴¹ Quoted in Boynton and Burton (2003: 252).

⁴² Ann Morton's extremely useful guide to primary sources would be the place to begin (Morton 1997).

References

Argles, M (1964) *South Kensington to Robbins: an Account of English Technical and Scientific Education since 1851*, London: Longmans.

Baker, M. and Richardson, B. eds. (1997) *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: V & A Publications.

Bell, Q. (1963) *The Schools of Design*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Boynton, E. and Burton, A. (2003) *The Great Exhibitor: The Life and Work of Henry Cole*, London: V & A.

Burton, A. (1999) *Vision & Accident: The Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: V & A Publications.

Cardwell, D. S. L. (1972) *The Organisation of Science*, London: Heinemann.

Crowther, J. G. (1965) *Statesmen of Science*, London: Cresset Press.

Denis, R. C. (1997) 'Teaching by Example: Education and the Formation of South Kensington's Museums' in M. Baker and B. Richardson (eds). (1997) *A Grand Design: The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: V & A Publications.

Forgan, S. (1994) 'The Architecture of Display: Museums, Universities and Objects in nineteenth Century Britain,' *History of Science* 32: 139-162.

Forgan, S. and Gooday, G. (1994) 'A Fungoid Assemblage of Buildings,' *History of Universities* 13: 153-92.

Forgan, S. and Gooday, G. (1996) 'Constructing South Kensington: the Buildings and Politics of T. H. Huxley's Working Environments,' *British Journal of the History of Science* 29: 435-68;

Harte, N. (1986) *The University of London 1836-1986*, London: Athlone Press, London.

Hobhouse, H (1983) *Prince Albert: His Life and Work*, London: Hamish Hamilton.

Humberstone, T. L. (1907) *University Reform in London* (with a preface by H. G. Wells) London: George Allen & Unwin.

Hurt, J. (1971) *Education in Evolution: Church, State, Society and Popular Education 1800-1870*, London Rupert Hart-Davis.

Hutchison, S. C. (1968) *The History of the Royal Academy 1768-1968*, New York: Taplinger.

James, R. R. (1984) *Prince Albert*, New York: Knopf

Morton, A. (1997) *Education and the State from 1833* (Public Record Office Readers' Guide no. 18) Richmond: PRO Publications.

Mueller, D. F., Ringer, F., and Simon, B. (1987) *The Rise of the Modern Educational System*, Cambridge: Cambridge University.

Physick, J. (1982) *The Victoria and Albert Museum: The History of Its Buildings*, Oxford: Phaidon, Oxford.

Pickstone, J. V (2000) *Ways of Knowing*, Manchester: University of Manchester.

Poovey, M. (1995) *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830-1864*, Chicago: University of Chicago.

Port, M. H. (1995) *Imperial London: Civil Government Building in London 1850-1915*, Yale: Yale University Press

Roach, J. (1986) *A History of Secondary Education in England, 1800-1870*, London: Longman.

Simon, B. (1987) 'Systematisation and Segmentation in Sducation: the Case of England', in D. F. Mueller, F. Ringer, F., and B. Simon (1987) *The Rise of the Modern Educational System*, (88-110) Cambridge: Cambridge University.

Survey of London: The Museums Area of South Kensington and Westminster (1975), volume 38, (edited by F. H. W. Shepherd) London: Athlone Press.

Weintraub, S. (1997) *Uncrowned King: the Life of Prince Albert*, New York: Free Press, New York.

* Bruce Robertson, a native New Zealander, was educated at Swarthmore College and Yale University, where he received a PhD in art history in 1987. Most of his career has been spent balanced between curatorial work in museums (at the Corcoran Gallery and The Cleveland Museum of Art) and teaching at universities (University of Delaware, Oberlin, and CWRU). He is now a professor and former chair of the Department of History of Art and Architecture, University of California, Santa Barbara. He has published widely in American and British art, with books on such artists as Paul Sandby, Winslow Homer, and Marsden Hartley.