

The New Criterion

Dispatch September 03, 2021 11:00 am

O Taste and See

by Timothy Jacobson

In 1884, Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers (1827–1900) gifted to the University of Oxford twenty-two thousand objects he had gathered from around the world. As a condition, he stipulated that the university appoint a permanent lecturer in anthropology, that the collection be housed in its own dedicated building, and that the university retain the “general mode of display” that he thought fitting. His museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum of Ethnography and World Archaeology, first opened to visitors in 1887. Sitting just behind and adjoining the Oxford Museum of Natural History, the collection has now grown to include more than half a million objects.

Several years ago, a friend recommended I visit, saying that the museum is just up Parks Road and across from Keble College. What I first found, and what I mistook for my goal, was the aforementioned Natural History Museum, a neo-gothic temple of stone, glass, and iron, evoking a great railway terminal. Visitors to the Pitt Rivers Museum today enter it only through this magnificent structure, which opened three decades before the Pitt Rivers.

Pitt-Rivers was a career officer in the British Army, commissioned in the Grenadier Guards in 1845. He served in the Crimean War, as well as in Malta, Canada, and Ireland, and in 1880 inherited from his great uncle large estates and the Pitt-Rivers name, which made him one of the most prominent landowners in England and a wealthy man for the remainder of his days. Though not a great traveler outside of his army postings, he had immense curiosity about the wider world around him, which he expressed through collecting on a grand and global scale. He started in the 1850s and never lost steam, gathering thousands of objects at auctions, from antique dealers, and by private sale. After his death, gifts from others who typically had spent time overseas as soldiers, missionaries, colonial officers, teachers, doctors, and tourists swelled the collection to its present colossal bulk.

To Pitt-Rivers, collecting had a specific purpose: to demonstrate the progression of human history from “the most simple to the most complex” through objects. The museum retains many of its founder’s ideas. A typology of function—how objects were used—still governs the arrangement of the displays, rather than the age of the objects or their geographical origin. Arranging the objects

by their use or type illustrates how different people and cultures at different times coped with the mundane and universal challenges of living. There are groupings of varied objects, for example, for kindling fire, for music-making, for clothing and decorating the body, for hunting, fishing, and growing food, and for healing sickness and dealing with death. "There is no need to view the displays in any particular order," an introductory brochure explains. "Most visitors enjoy wondering and wandering." Though Pitt-Rivers never saw most of today's collection, he would likely still feel at home.

Browsing the displays, you might find ancient pottery from the island of Cyprus; demon masks from Korea and Indonesia; Egyptian funeral coins, both genuine and fake; a head ornament of the Wosera people of New Guinea; a Nigerian medicine man's divination apparatus; a lacquered geometric compass from China; the figure of a rhinoceros hornbill from Malaya; a knife made with meteoric iron; a betel nut crusher; a club with its handle covered with plaited plant material; or a William III shilling. The place is packed—excepting the narrow, maze-like aisles, virtually every square foot of floor space is covered with display cases made of wood and glass. Some go back to Pitt-Rivers's own time, others were later made to look Victorian. Beneath some cases, you will find shallow drawers filled with even more treasures. Retained from the museum's early days, handwritten labels identifying each object add to this feeling of density, for instance: "S. India, Madras, Tuticorin, Nostril clip used by Arab pearl divers in India and Ceylon, to stop breathing, 1926." "Iron razor used by sailors in the ceremony of 'crossing the line,' English." "Silvered & stoppered bottle said to contain a witch, obtained about 1915 from an old lady in a village year Hove, Sussex."

While some of the cognoscenti from Pitt-Rivers's age (Swinburne, Arnold, Hardy) were busily wringing hands and losing faith, others were just getting on with the excitement and opportunity that life in their time offered so abundantly. Pitt-Rivers was such a character, which makes him especially remote from our times. And so his museum seems remote too. He was not an overly reflective sort of man; his legacy is his collection of things. Nowadays there is a field of "object biography," which Pitt-Rivers did not know about. He had some ideas about "development," but they were just that: "I look upon my museum as being in no way an exception to the ordinary laws affecting all human affairs in regard to development, and that so far from considering it perfect as it is, I cannot conceive of any idea of finality in a museum of this kind."

Here, he tells us, is what I see in all of this *stuff*. What do we, a century later, see? Some of it happens to be beautiful, some of it frightening, inscrutable, or just plain ordinary. What do we make of it? Wander around and wonder, the old Victorian invites us. Use the magnifying glass and the flashlight that the museum thoughtfully provides, get close, read the labels, open the drawers. The experience will take you back to the not-that-distant past, before museums became earnestly educational and ideological. Here you will find no agenda, no narrative, no message. Unless you feel so already, you will not go away feeling guilty. Rather, this is a place that trusts visitors to find it for themselves, whatever it is, and take pleasure in the search.

Pitt-Rivers was a contemporary of Trollope and, in my view, a man of the same fundamentally generous spirit, curious about the world as he found it and content to take reality as it comes. “Here is what I have to offer,” they seem to tell us of their efforts. “I have worked diligently at a picture for you to consider and believe it to be work well done.” With Trollope you must read the novels, most of them thick and subtle and rich. Here, you only need to wander among the cases, thick and rich with the oddments of living and then, as the Psalmist says, “O Taste and See.”

Timothy Jacobson (1948–2024) wrote from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia.