

Collecting the World: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum

By James Delbourgo. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017. 544 pages. ISBN: 9780674737334.

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Hans Sloane was born in 1660 in Ulster, in northern Ireland, to servants of the aristocracy. By the end of his long life (he died at age 92 in 1753), he surprisingly had become one of the wealthiest men in England, the only person to have simultaneously held titles of president of the Royal College of Physicians and president of the Royal Society, and the compiler and organizer of vast and curious collections that formed the basis of “the world’s first free national public museum.” The premise of this volume is that Sloane did not collect in a vacuum; the places he visited, the people he interacted with, the scientific modes of the day, and political trade routes all influenced the resulting collections. Sloane’s prominence in British society, extensive worldwide contacts, and great wealth afforded him rare opportunities to collect globally.

An insatiable collector from an early age, Sloane was interested primarily in acquiring natural history specimens, although what we would now call anthropological objects also delighted him. In this erudite volume, Delbourgo, associate professor of history at Rutgers University, discusses how Sloane’s “encyclopedic collecting on a global scale shaped the origins of the modern museum.” The author spent many hours in archives, and a strength of this volume is his telling of Sloane’s story through primary sources—not just manuscripts and correspondence but including, for the first time, Sloane’s surviving objects, specimens, and catalogs. Sumptuously illustrated, with 42 color plates and dozens of in-text black-and-white maps and images, this volume is the first biography of Sloane in more than 60 years but is a biography with a twist, as the author discusses in detail the historical milieu in which Sloane existed, writing at length about the Jamaican slave trade, early 18th-century medical practices, British trade routes in Asia, and scientific discovery and methods in Enlightenment England. Delbourgo’s volume is a scholarly work—in fact, a third of the book comprises endnotes and references. As such, it is meant to be a comprehensive treatise on the global factors that informed Sloane’s collecting habits and shaped the public museum.

Sloane gained his wealth in a variety of ways: serving as physician to the upper echelons of British society, marrying into a family that held vast Jamaican plantations, collecting rent on London lands, and collecting salaries from public offices. Early in his career, he traveled to Jamaica as the private physician of the Duke of Albemarle. Already supremely interested in collecting natural history

specimens, Sloane used the 15 months in Jamaica to his advantage. Delbourgo discusses Sloane’s use of slave labor to collect specimens; this foundation for the first public museum has not been widely acknowledged. In 1707 and 1725, the two volumes of his *The History of Jamaica* were published. An important work at the time that has not held up well under centuries of scrutiny, it nevertheless provides an engaging account of Jamaica of the time. Sloane was criticized for the way in which he featured illustrations that artificially paired preserved specimens from his extensive collections with live specimens to display all features of a plant. Sloane’s narrative accompanying the images was sometimes speculative, as he included information about specimens provided by his surrogate collectors, which could not always be scientifically verified and sometimes pushed the bounds of credibility.

Sloane’s position as an eminent physician and scholar also happily placed him an enviable position as a collector. Many of his esteemed clients sent him specimens in thanks for return to good health. In addition, as secretary of the Royal Society and longtime editor of its scholarly journal, he was placed in touch with scholars from around the world and in many cases traded specimens with them. Likewise, Sloane was a “collector of collectors,” paying others to collect on his behalf in far reaches of the world. He used contacts in the East India Trading Company, Jesuit missionaries, and even a former pirate to collect on his behalf. Furthermore, he had no qualms about outright acquiring collections of former rivals from their widows. Delbourgo argues that Sloane was particularly and perhaps singularly well situated to collect on such a global scale—and that acquiring the vast collections of this type could only be possible by collecting *people* as he did.

For those of us working in museums and archives, perhaps the most fascinating part of the book is the final two chapters on how Sloane organized and documented his collections and how they became the basis for the British Museum. Sloane passionately organized and systemically cataloged his extensive finds with a focus on searchability. His priority was to acquire, preserve, and document his specimens for others to use in order to expose superstitious practices and further scientific knowledge. As he reached advanced old age, Sloane pondered the fate of his collections and hoped to live on posthumously through them. With no male heir, Sloane had more choices than many of his peers in determining what to do with his holdings after his death. He hoped to sell his collections to the government at a fraction of their worth in order to provide for his daughters. After his death, Parliament debated the proposal, and on June 7, 1753, King George II affirmed the creation of British Museum to benefit the public. Six years after his death, Sloane’s museum was opened but may not have reflected his vision. For one, Sloane wanted free universal access, but curators worried about unfettered access by the masses, and permanent guards were placed on-site from 1793. Staff reorganized Sloane’s arrangements, in part to fit the space and in part to reflect more modern scientific

divisions among types of specimens. Exhibit cases were quickly ordered to keep things on view but not touched. Delbourgo often discusses the vastness of Sloane's collections: would it be possible for all of them to be on display? I was left wondering about additional storage and how certain objects were selected for display if not everything was viewable by the public.

Delbourgo argues that Sloane's legacy has been hidden in part because his collections became usurped by additions to the British Museum and by progress in scientific nomenclature and arrangement. In becoming institutionalized, his collections lost original context. Delbourgo raises some interesting points about the curator's responsibility, if any, to the wishes and whims of the original collector of objects that he or she acquires. Delbourgo thoroughly proves his premise that "Sloane is nowhere because he was everywhere"; in dividing his founding collections by modern scholarly specialization, his original collecting intent was subjugated.

Delbourgo's work is a paragon of scholarly achievement, with extensive citations and quotations from primary sources. It is not an easy or quick read but does represent a worthwhile effort for those interested in the history of science and scientific collecting in the 18th century. If you are a reader who appreciates the wide historical context in which an individual operated, this book will far exceed your expectations. If you are interested primarily in the founding days and early organization of the British Museum, this volume may appear off topic. However, the title aptly asserts that the volume is primarily about Hans Sloane and his world, and as a biography it excels.

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