

MANY WORDS HAVE both a literal and a metaphorical meaning, but the distribution of the weight of these two registers differs from one case to another. The fact that the word *astonished* – literally, ‘thunder-struck’ – is only ever used in a metaphorical sense may explain why its etymology has sometimes been misunderstood as signifying ‘turned to stone’ (a misunderstanding no doubt helped by its archaic form *astonied*). The literal meaning of *petrified*, by contrast, still has currency; fear can render humans as motionless as those trees that age and chemistry have turned to stone. *Fossil*, too, has a wide figurative application, as something that has been taken out of the living stream and preserved as a dead relic of its former vital self. This brings us closer to the word *museum*, a palace of the Muses where people go to gaze upon things that are either dead or have never lived. As an analogy, the word is often applied to a community, such as a village, that has been prevented by force or financial incentive from manifesting any signs of modernisation, usually for the benefit of tourists. However, *museum* differs from the other three examples in one important respect: the relationship between its literal and metaphorical meanings is not one-way but dialectical. The message that this book conveys with unambiguous force is that the idea of a museum as a mere charnel house of inert objects is profoundly mistaken; in reality, a museum conforms more to the metaphorical notion of a disconnected human community far more than we might ever have imagined.

The reciprocity between these two kinds of museums is part of a fascinating mirror-imagery that runs through *Nomadic Artefacts*. The opening chapters adopt the vantage point of West, with a historical survey of ethnographic collecting and museums in Austria. The focus here is on the history of collecting since the 19th century, but includes a survey of the precedents of these practices as far back as the 16th century. Above all, we see the biography of Vienna’s Museum of Ethnology through its successive historical and nominal avatars down to its present form as the Weltmuseum. While many readers will be astonished at the degree to which it has been subjected to ideological factors, unrealised plans, underfunding and political whims, what emerges is an optimistic message about the museum’s vitality and adaptability in an uncertain and constantly changing environment.

The artefacts in the museum are ‘nomadic’ not only in sense that they have made long and often circuitous journeys to Vienna (where they have also been subject to considerable local displacement) but also because they were created by inhabitants of the steppes; and it is here, in Inner Asia, that the perspective of the later chapters of the book takes its position. As the counterpoint to the life story of Vienna’s Weltmuseum we have the history of the first museum in Mongolia, which was created within the framework of the predecessor of the Mongolian Academy of Science. Especially intriguing are the excerpts from early travellers’ reports of the Bogd Khan’s private museum, a remarkably eclectic collection of international oddities that illustrates even more starkly than its Western counterparts a fundamental truth about collecting. Why do people collect? Apart from being a secular ruler, the Bogd Khan was also a Tibetan Buddhist hierarch – in fact, the highest in rank only after the Dalai and

Panchen Lamas. His range had to be seen to be vast. Reasons for collecting may include mundane impulses such as the desire for prestige or wealth, but, as Krzysztof Pomian reminds us in his essay on collections and collectors (1987), the essential feature of all collections is that “they are intermediaries between the observer and the invisible realm from which they come”, and are put on display precisely to evoke the collector’s command over that connection.

Whatever these objects and collections in Austria may mean to those who acquired them and also those who now curate and visit them, their value is something quite different in the society where they originated. This is something we might never have known, had the authors not gone out of their way – a very long way – to find out, by asking the inheritors of the culture that produced them. The work of writers such as Alfred Gell and Igor Kopytoff is well enough known, and their arguments widely enough accepted, that the authors of this book do not need to build a case for the personhood of objects from scratch. Personhood is not intrinsic to humans or objects, but arises from attribution of meaning and status by the social environment in which they are situated, and this is especially true for those that (or who) are endowed with sacred qualities. The reader has the unsettling feeling that the interviewees here are not speaking about artefacts, but about members of their community who have been consigned to a reluctant exile or a prison where they cannot receive the reverence that is their due. But the alienation of these artefacts is the darkest and most poignant of all the mirrors in this book, reflecting as it does the lives of those men and women, Mongolian, Russian and Buryat, lay and clerical, whose passion for these creations and empathy for the civilisation that produced them were the reasons why they ended their days in the charge not of the collector or curator, but of the prison guard or, more often, the executioner.

*Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings,
have fallen upon your brain softly as light.
Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before.
And yet in reality not one has been extinguished.*

Thomas De Quincey
Suspiria de Profundis, 1845