Representing Enlightenment Space

Beth Lord

There is a current trend for museums to represent Enlightenment museum spaces, recreating the displays of the eighteenth century. In this chapter I will ask why museums are representing Enlightenment spaces in the twenty-first century, suggesting that the answer has to do with the concept of representation itself. I will look at three recent exhibitions that manifest this trend: Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century, a major new permanent display at the British Museum; Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780-1836, a 2001-02 temporary exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery; and the new, permanent Darwin Centre at the Natural History Museum.¹ What these three exhibitions have in common is that they not only display the art and objects collected in the eighteenth century, but also show how these collections were understood, organized and displayed at the time they were collected. These exhibitions share an ambitious aim to increase visitors’ understanding of the history of the museum space, and to challenge them to consider the nature of museum representation itself. I will argue that it is in this sense that they are truly ‘Enlightenment’ spaces, and I will consider the challenges this approach poses to museums and visitors.

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If we were to ask what people associate with the historical period known as the Enlightenment, the range of answers would be fairly predictable. Some might associate the Enlightenment with rational humanism, political republicanism, and the rejection of religious and monarchical authority; others might include developments in capitalism and colonialism, and the beginnings of the industrial revolution. It is likely, moreover, that any description of the Enlightenment would be of an era defined by independent thinking, scientific rigour, observation and experiment, and ordering and classifying information with the aim of building universal systems of knowledge. This is what people understand by ‘Enlightenment’.

If we consider these defining characteristics of rationalism, experiment, order, classification and universality, however, we find them equally present in pre-Enlightenment thinking. Aristotelian philosophy was centrally concerned with determining the categories of the world so that nature might be better understood for the purposes of our practical, empirical engagements with it. Rational Aristotelian system-building went on to dominate the medieval period, in which philosophers set out to discover the order of the universe put in place by God.

The striving for order, classification and universal systems that we associate with the Enlightenment is not new or unique to that era. What is new is that with the rejection of religious and monarchical authority comes a rejection of the idea that the universe has an essential or divine order. Because divine systems are thrown into doubt, a thing’s place in a system can no longer be assumed simply to be part of the essence of what it is to be that thing. Instead, the systems are now thought to be the product of human understanding, and these systems are suddenly at odds with the world of things.
that are not humanly-produced. The Enlightenment recognizes, for the first time, that there is a gap—a space, if you will—between nature and the systems we use to order it.

This space is the space of representation, and I would like to argue that the age of Enlightenment is characterized by this space. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault defines representation as the space opened up by the separation of words and things—*Les mots et les choses* in the book’s original title.² The problem of this separation is the driving force of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought. The major philosophical questions of the era concern the relation between mind and world—how is it that words, concepts, and human understanding relate to the things that we experience? It is the problem that occupies Descartes, Hume, and Locke, and the problem that Kant struggles with in every one of his texts. As Foucault argues, the problem of representation is fundamentally new to the age of Enlightenment. The problem simply does not exist for ancient and medieval thinking, for in a universe of things whose concepts are included in them by God, ready for human reason to discover, there is no space between the thing and its concept.³

Enlightenment, then, might be characterized in two points. First, it is characterized by the open rejection of blind reliance on systems handed down by authority, as exemplified by Descartes’ method of starting from first principles, and by Kant’s claim that Enlightenment requires the ‘freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters’.⁴ Second, Enlightenment involves the creation of new systems based upon the recognition that there is a gap between the system and what it purports to describe. Kant’s philosophy is the pinnacle of architectonic system-building, yet all his work is
occupied with the question of what justifies us in ascribing human systems to the non-human world of nature. Enlightenment thinking struggles with the need to create new systems, for it is always aware of the gap between those systems and the things themselves.

The space of representation that originates with the Enlightenment manifests itself in the birth of the museum. The museum as understood in the eighteenth century is more than just a collection of particular things – it aims at universality. This is one way in which the museum differs from the private collection or the ‘cabinet of curiosities’, as exemplified by the founding of the British Museum in 1753 as a ‘universal museum’. The museum brings together disparate collections from different branches of knowledge and interprets them according to a system of classification, the guiding editorial principle of which is the assumption that they can be interconnected in a universal system. Incidentally, this assumption is the same one that Kant says we must make when trying to interpret the vast diversity of nature – in order to make any sense of things at all, we must assume that nature does conform to ‘a system our understanding can grasp’, although we have no proof that nature actually does conform to such a system. Systems of classification, for Kant, are artificial, invented by human understanding and interpreted into nature, in an attempt to bridge the gap of representation.

It is the role of the museum in the eighteenth century not only to study and display objects, but to study and display these human systems for understanding objects. This is another way that the museum goes beyond the private collection: from the start it is concerned with interpretation, with how objects are systematically represented. It is at
this time that ‘curiosity’ becomes increasingly regarded as an outmoded way of thinking, in favour of methodical classification. The museum is quite literally a space for representation – a space in which the representational system itself is put on display, and in which scholars and visitors, through looking at objects, can think about the adequacy of that ‘artificial’ system to nature. Of course, the expanding role of the museum in the eighteenth century must be attributed to a complex of social, economic, intellectual and political factors which it is not my intention to marginalize. But the impulse among Enlightenment collectors to classify things and to make them publicly available in a certain systematic form is made possible by that era’s new concern with the space of representation.

Foucault thus discusses the phenomena of amassing and displaying collections in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the context of this Enlightenment mode of thought:

It is often said that the establishment of botanical gardens and zoological collections expressed a new curiosity about exotic plants and animals. In fact, these had already claimed men’s interest for a long while. What had changed was the space in which it was possible to see them and from which it was possible to describe them. For Foucault, it is not primarily the new European curiosity about the world that makes the museum possible in the Enlightenment era. This curiosity had already long been present, although the rise of capitalism and colonialism certainly gave more people the means to transform this curiosity into active collecting. As a result, the museum, botanical garden, and menagerie become materially possible. Conceptually, however, they are made possible by the space between human systems of thought and
the things themselves – the space of representation that governs Enlightenment thinking. Only when this space opens, when the relationship between things and the concepts we apply to them becomes problematic, is it possible to create a physical space for positing and questioning the nature of this relationship. Positing and questioning the relationship between things and systems is *interpretation*. Museums are fundamentally about interpretation – about attempting to bridge the gap between things and systems.

It is in this context that I’d like to look at three museum exhibitions that recreate, represent or evoke Enlightenment museum spaces: the Enlightenment gallery at the British Museum, *Art on the Line* at the Courtauld, and the Darwin Centre at the Natural History Museum. I suggested that what these exhibitions have in common is that they not only display art and objects collected during the Enlightenment, but also show *how* these collections were understood, organized and displayed in the Enlightenment. The exhibitions show us the Enlightenment museum, and are in different ways concerned with helping visitors to understand the principles of order, classification and universality that have governed museum collecting and display. But what is truly ‘Enlightenment’ about these exhibitions is that they challenge us to consider the nature of representation, and this challenge is at the heart of all Enlightenment thinking. These exhibitions are spaces for representing systems of representation themselves, asking visitors to consider what museum space is for.
The aim of the British Museum from 1753 to be a ‘universal museum’ is reflected in *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, which opened in 2003 to mark the British Museum’s 250th anniversary. It is a permanent display in the King’s Library, the room designed and built by Robert Smirke in 1823-7 to house the library of King George III. The books were moved to the new British Library building in 1998 and the room was restored to its original condition to house ‘a permanent display of objects selected from the rich stores of the Museum, arranged in an exhibition devoted to discovery and learning in the age of George III’.

The gallery is loosely divided into seven sections exhibiting the types of objects that would have been present in the Museum in the eighteenth century, organized according to the interests of eighteenth-century collectors. The central section, called Classifying the World, brings the themes together to consider methods of classification used by Enlightenment collectors and scientists, and by the British Museum itself.

Objects are exhibited in the Library’s original nineteenth-century manuscript cases with sloping glass tops; glazed cabinets full of objects from the reserve collections line the walls. While the manuscript cases are accompanied by interpretive panels and labels, the cabinets are entirely without text (a guide to the objects is available on request). Extensively researched and painstakingly recreated, the room beautifully and effectively evokes an eighteenth-century museum space. The effect on a modern-day visitor can be remarkable. This is an exhibition where we are invited not only to look at and think about objects, but also to think about how they are organized and presented; to consider the governing principle behind their selection and arrangement; to think about how and why museums represent things in certain ways. The text
panels and gallery guide encourage visitors to think about the ‘culture of collecting and classification’, and how and why it arose in the Enlightenment.

The Darwin Centre at the Natural History Museum similarly aims to challenge visitors to think about museum representation. The Darwin Centre is different from the Enlightenment Gallery in that it is primarily a research centre housed in a state-of-the-art new building, and does not outwardly look like an Enlightenment space. The space accessible to the visitor in Phase One features interactive terminals that explain the significance of the specimens preserved in formaldehyde, and the work undertaken in the centre.

But if the physical space is not eighteenth-century, the interpretive space is. The rows upon rows of glass jars of preserved specimens of indeterminate age evoke a quintessentially eighteenth-century mode of collecting and presenting nature. The oldest specimens date from the seventeenth century; labels on glass jars name the voyages on which specimens were collected, evoking the same sense of discovery present in the Enlightenment gallery. The numbers, too, are awe-inspiring: 22 million zoological specimens in 450,000 jars, holding 350,000 litres of alcohol in Phase One alone. The small number of jars visible to the public are closely packed onto shelves with minimal interpretation, resembling the glazed wall cases of the British Museum’s Enlightenment gallery. Even the demonstration area, where scientists present the collections to the public, recalls eighteenth century public lectures on science.

Furthermore, what the Darwin Centre presents to the public is fundamentally an Enlightenment idea: that all of nature – or at least as much of it as is physically and
ethically possible – is brought together under one roof, classified according to the latest taxonomic and systematic thinking, and put on display more or less as-is.

Researchers at the Darwin Centre specialize in taxonomy and systematics, and the fact that the centre is focused on systems of classification comes through clearly in the interpretive panels and interactive displays. Through both the displays and the guided behind-the-scenes tours, visitors may reflect upon scientific methods of representing nature through systems of classification. Further, the Natural History Museum’s description of the Darwin Centre as marking a ‘new era’ that will ‘radically alter public perception of what a museum can be and bring people closer to the heart of its day-to-day work’, suggests an aim to challenge visitors to think about museum space and museum representation – to consider what museums are and how they work.

*Art on the Line*, a temporary exhibition shown at the Courtauld in 2001-02, aimed even more explicitly to consider the nature of gallery space. This exhibition recreated a Royal Academy exhibition from the late eighteenth century in the Great Room of Somerset House, the same room in which the RA exhibition was held at that time. Paintings were hung frame-to-frame, floor to ceiling, as they would have been then, overwhelming today’s visitor and conflicting with current expectations of the gallery space. The exhibition featured reviews and satirical drawings contemporary with these historical exhibitions, to show the visitor the social and economic context in which paintings were made and exhibited. This was a remarkable exhibition, for it put the audience *both* in the place of an eighteenth-century audience, looking at the paintings, experiencing the space and enjoying the social aspect of gallery-going, *and* in the reflexive position of a twenty-first century audience, looking at the way in which
eighteenth-century audiences experienced exhibitions. The exhibition raised the question of what it is to be a gallery audience and what an exhibition of paintings is for, challenging audiences to think about systems of displaying art, and about the social function of museums and galleries.

Why are these exhibitions that return to Enlightenment modes of display opening today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century? There are a number of interrelated reasons. For the British Museum and Natural History Museum, the need to increase public access to collections previously in storage has been a major factor. These galleries allow great numbers of objects from reserve collections to be brought to public view, arranged closely together in cases with very little by way of interpretive text or labelling – both the Enlightenment gallery and the Darwin Centre present something akin to visible storage. Helping visitors to orient themselves historically to the museum is also a factor: the Enlightenment gallery can function as an introduction to the British Museum through the history of its collectors and collections, while the Darwin Centre introduces visitors to the work of taxonomic researchers over the past 400 years that has been fundamental to the development of the Natural History Museum. It has also been suggested that these exhibitions represent a reaction against the trend for exhibitions led by designers and educators: Enlightenment displays return power to curators and restore objects as the essence of the museum.12

I have argued, however, that museums are not fundamentally about objects, but about the space of representation. The museum does not simply present objects; it presents and questions the space between objects and conceptual systems. I’d like to suggest, then, that the overriding reason for recreating Enlightenment spaces today is that the
question of museum representation has become relevant again as it has not been since
the late eighteenth-century. Questions of how and why we represent objects, from
whose cultural perspective, and according to which set of presuppositions, are of
enormous importance as the role of museums as centres for learning, inclusion, and
community-building is fully recognized. We are returning to an age of
interdisciplinary learning that was lost with the fragmentation of disciplines in the
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We are returning to the notion that the
organizing principle behind museum display can be the theme, material, or function of
the objects as well as their chronology or geography. The recognition that there can be
more than one ‘correct’ way of classifying objects, and that there can be a multiplicity
of ways of interpreting them, leads us to question the very nature of classification
systems and the very nature of interpretation. This above all marks a return to an
Enlightenment way of thinking: questioning the very nature of representation, the way
that we apply words, concepts, and interpretive systems to things.

3.

One role of the contemporary museum can be to challenge us to rethink the
interpretive systems we do apply to things, and to encourage us to see things in a
different way. I have suggested that these Enlightenment spaces, in being centrally
concerned with the nature of representation, do just that. But the question of visitors’
reactions to these galleries is another matter. What do visitors make of these spaces,
that on the one hand seem to resemble the archetypal image of what a ‘museum’ is,
and on the other hand encourage them to question that image? Kim Sloan, principal
curator of the Enlightenment gallery, has said that because audiences today are
accustomed to museums providing hi-tech, interactive ‘edutainment’ experiences, they are pleasantly surprised to encounter an old-fashioned approach in the gallery.\textsuperscript{13} The Enlightenment gallery allows them to spend time with the objects, without too much interpretive mediation, and without any audio-visual mediation other than an optional audioguide. Visitors have expressed a desire to return to the Museum, because they did not have time to look at all the objects. This is a wonderfully positive public reaction to the gallery, and undoubtedly there are many audiences who do appreciate the old-fashioned display and the absence of computer screens. If museums \textit{are} motivated by the desire to reassert curatorial power, these responses vindicate the decision to do so by seeming to affirm a public interest in objects over interpretation.

I think that there are challenges, however, with the Enlightenment mode of presentation, and with the assumption that objects alone are enough to engage audiences. Public perceptions of the ‘museum’, particularly amongst those who have not visited museums or have had negative experiences there as a child, continue to be dominated by the image of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century museum: shelves full of dusty, decaying objects accompanied by dry, didactic texts, closed off to the visitor both physically and intellectually. It is true that museums no longer resemble this image to the extent that they did even ten years ago, but within the British Museum and Natural History Museum, examples can be found of exhibits that have not moved far beyond it. Numerous galleries involve an adaptive reuse of nineteenth-century cases, not so dissimilar from their use in the Enlightenment gallery. Modes of display often continue to be traditional and didactic. Many museum exhibits all over the world continue to offer this \textit{form} of presentation, even if it is supplemented by updated styles of display and interactive terminals.
While the Enlightenment gallery at the British Museum should not be counted amongst these old-fashioned exhibits, it is unclear how visitors are to differentiate them. Many visitors strolling through the galleries on the Museum’s ground floor will not realize that they’re seeing something different from what’s in the Egyptian gallery next door – that with the Enlightenment gallery, they’re not just seeing a museum exhibition, but a representation of a certain type of museum exhibition. The danger is that in representing a historical museum space, the Enlightenment gallery may fulfil people’s worst fears about what museums are – long rooms of closely-packed shelves, eighteenth-century cabinets and marble busts, with little interpretation. The Darwin Centre has a similar problem. The obvious barrier is that jars of specimens are rather boring to the non-specialist visitor; it is only when the history of the taxonomic system behind the jars is apparent that they become more interesting. But the system is ‘invisible’, to borrow Tony Bennett’s term. It is not made apparent through looking at objects. As a result, those with knowledge of the system must ‘enlighten’ those without knowledge. With the recreation of the Enlightenment space the power of the curator, or the museum as a whole, over the visitor appears to be preserved.

However, I do not believe that either the Enlightenment Gallery or the Darwin Centre is an attempt to exercise institutional power over visitors. Rather, they are truly Enlightenment spaces to the extent that they challenge the visitor to consider the relationship between objects and systems of thought. In the twenty-first century, this means that they enable visitors to apply different interpretive systems to the objects, and encourage the idea that objects can be aligned with a plurality of coherent conceptual schemes. This, surely, is one institutional motivation behind the recreation
of Enlightenment spaces; in providing minimal interpretation, museums invite visitors to relate the objects to systems relevant to themselves, not only to the systems suggested by the museum. Indeed, Neil MacGregor has called the British Museum and museums in general ‘communities of interpretation’ that are based on the recognition that ‘within the same museum object, different histories, meanings and functions may freely cohabit’. This recognition is, I believe, reflected in the Enlightenment gallery, but is complex and perhaps inevitably gives rise to challenges and barriers. With the right interpretation, however, these barriers can be the ideal starting point for visitors to consider what a museum is. If they start out thinking that this exhibition is no different from any other, the interpretation, explaining that the gallery represents an Enlightenment understanding of museum space, might encourage them to consider why these objects were collected, why they are organized and presented in a certain way, and how they can be interpreted and understood. In this way, a visitor’s negative perception of the ‘museum’ can be challenged and, hopefully, changed. Far from trying to reassert institutional power, I believe that with these galleries museums have a progressive aim to open themselves to new audiences, returning to the Enlightenment ideal of democratic participation in learning and knowledge.

4.

I’d like to finish by asking what the future of Enlightenment museum spaces might be – spaces that reflect on the nature of museum representation. In terms of our ways of thinking, we are still broadly in the era of Enlightenment. The question of the relationship between words, concepts, systems, and things – the question of
representation – continues to dominate philosophy with the same force that it did in Kant’s day. Museums continue to be made possible by this space – they continue to posit and question relationships between systems and things. In recreating Enlightenment spaces, I’ve suggested, museums add a complicating interpretive layer: they bring the question of interpretation to the fore, challenging visitors to reconsider conceptual systems and their relationship to objects.

What is changing, however, is our perception of who should have control over the conceptual systems to be related to objects. More and more, museums invite visitors themselves to control this process, to apply conceptual systems from cultures and backgrounds that are different from the culture in which the museum was created. Visitors are invited to construct their own experience in a way relevant to them. In this way, Enlightenment spaces become networked spaces. Networks are all about systems, but instead of being imposed from above, they are user-led and user-organised. Networks allow for groups and individuals to build systems, rather than discovering or understanding the systems imposed by authority. In this sense they allow for multiple perspectives and multiple interpretations.

Networks can be exemplified by the internet and its associated applications – people now routinely build their own collections of music and organize their own content for frequently visited websites. Networks are also exemplified by reality television, which, I believe, has gained such a popular response because it allows viewers to organize their experience and control the outcome of the show. These experiences are more than merely interactive – they are actually organizing, system-building experiences. To the extent that museums enable visitors to organize their own
experience, to experiment with systems of classification, and to think about how museum representation works, they continue to be ‘Enlightenment’ spaces in the networked age. The Dulwich Picture Gallery – an Enlightenment space *par excellence* – has introduced interactive palmtop units for schools, into which the student programmes the artworks he or she finds meaningful, creating an individual learning programme and a personal record of the gallery experience. This model need not be restricted to networking information, but can involve networks of artefacts, experiences, learning, socializing, eating, drinking and shopping – the visitor organizes his or her own museum experience. This is the goal of the small city of Cerritos, California, which is planning a museum that will be networked to the library and to the city’s performing arts centre. The city’s Experience Library is already a networked experience, with themed rooms networking artefacts, computers and books, and there are queues to get in from all over the surrounding region.

There is a move towards the space of representation being visitor-governed to which today’s Enlightenment spaces are already responding. Museum interpretation becomes more and more about including visitors as equal participants in the process of bridging the gap between conceptual systems and things.
Bibliography


1 At the time of writing, only Phase One of the Darwin Centre has been completed.


12 I thank Eilean Hooper-Greenhill for drawing my attention to this point.

