

SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

My history with the British Museum goes back to 1959: my mother, fulfilling an earlier promise, took me to London for a week. The deal was that she would show me the sights, but I should choose where to go and for how long. Top of my list was the BM where we spent two full days. At the time the family lived near Plymouth and I had often been on Dartmoor and come across the Bronze Age traces, stone rows, circles and graves that are common there. An avid reader of Rosemary Sutcliffe's historical books, I was very keen on the Bronze Age and on Roman Britain. The Museum fulfilled my fantasies, nestling objects whose provenance I knew within a received discourse of the succession of cultures -Sumerian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman. Somehow all of these things seemed to link together, though it was hard for a nine-year-old to get excited by cabinets of red and black Attic figure ware. At the time the ethnographic collections were still housed at Great Russell Street. These objects were troubling to me (and enticing), neither distanced by antiquity nor familiar from books but somehow close in their - mostly organic - materiality. I had no mental place to put them and was discomfited.

I encountered them again as a student at St Martin's School of Art in the early 1970s when I was often at the Museum of Mankind in Burlington Gardens, where these collections had been installed. *Kingship in Africa* and somewhat later Eduardo Paolozzi's *Lost Magic Kingdoms* were unforgettable. From the Royal College of Art in the mid-'70s I spent more time at Great Russell Street, particularly during the redesign of the Egyptian Galleries. This went on for a long time and, in the process, the sculptures were moved and parked in various places. The way in which museum objects became revived by the temporary supporting constructions -sandbags, scaffolding and timber banks - that spoke clearly of their sheer physical weight, was wonderful. The great pink granite arm and fist of Rameses II, supported on masses of

sandbags, became exciting and vividly real. The perceived weight of the arm made the absent colossus imaginatively present. Almost inversely I began examining the four Nereids facing the reconstructed tomb of Xanthos, observing how the carving of the billowing draperies allowed the figures to appear weightless as they skimmed the waves.

Another Greek object, a large cast and chased bronze cauldron, also caught my attention, in this case because of the display and its label. Beside it was a sprig of leaves and flowers made from finely beaten gold, the stems twisted together. The label explained that the small gold bouquet was the only contents of the pot when it was excavated. That this enormous container, a full two-arm load, should only house this glittering and beautifully wrought scrap I found incredibly poignant, like a small light in the dark. The gesture of putting the one inside the other registered a meaning that seemed to obliterate history.

By the mid-'80s I had begun presenting a seminar course for students at Chelsea School of Art. The seminars were focused on the notion of empathy and I took the group to see objects on display around London. At the BM I chose a Guanyin figure, then on view in a room beyond the Prints and Drawings Gallery. The figure is perhaps life size, the wood gessoed and painted. The pose is relaxed, seated, the left arm languidly stretched out over the raised left knee, a slight contraposto twist of the body towards the front, the weight supported on the right hand, the right leg dangling. The gaze is direct and calm. A part of what I wanted to discuss was this apparent informality and directness of address to us. This is right since Guanyin is a *bodhisattva*, an intercessor on our behalf. Another part of what I wanted to point out was the pragmatic way in which bits of wood had been pegged and jointed together to give sufficient material for the carving. There was something humble in this that affected the way I looked at the figure.

During the 1990s while rereading the *Iliad*, I wandered through the display of Cycladic and early Greek objects when I came across the tiny bronze figurine of Ajax

- the earliest known representation of a Homeric figure. On another occasion, in the display of the Lindow Man, I found myself confronted by a recognisable individual not different from many of us surrounding the display case. This was someone one could know, a person with a face. What were they doing in a Museum showcase? Troubling, but also a recognition that what was in the museum is ours in as many ways as that word can be constructed. After 40 years I still do not know how much there is in the Museum and, in any case, it may be just the same things looked at differently.