

## Ashmolean revisited

**When a museum spends over £60 million on a major building project you might expect to be able to see it from the street but, as Jonathan Ives explains, they tend to do things a little differently in Oxford.**

The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology has always looked how most people think a museum should look. The neoclassical design, with its columns and portico, is grand and imposing, august in the Augustinian sense of the word, with the huge entrance doors, now restored to their original function (of which more later) signifying that great things lie behind them. And great things do lie behind them, not least the new five-floor building that provides a vast array of galleries and facilities that transform the Ashmolean as a building and an institution.

As a city Oxford is well-served – perhaps uniquely well-served – by its museums and galleries: the celebrated University Museum of Natural History; the Pitt Rivers Museum, which is connected to it; the Museum of the History of Science, which was the original home of the Ashmolean collection; the Museum of Oxford in the City Hall; Modern Art Oxford, which stands among the most highly regarded galleries in the UK; Christchurch College is still protective of the claims to greatness of its own picture gallery; and more besides. Among all these institutions, the Ashmolean stands as the most weighty of them all. It may not be the oldest (the Museum of the History of Science was the first purpose-built museum building in Britain and the oldest such building in the world) nor perhaps the best-loved (the densely packed and esoteric Pitt Rivers surely claims that title) but, by virtue of CR Cockerell's design, the breadth of its collection and the scale of its scholarship, the Ashmolean is the most celebrated; internationally recognised as one of the world's great museums.

Cockerell's building, which opened in 1845 as the University Galleries, provided a beautiful setting for the university's collection. However, as the collection grew the building was expanded in a piecemeal fashion over the next century and a half until by the mid-1990s there was a major scheme to provide facilities appropriate to a major public building, including a lecture theatre, café and shop. Professor Christopher White, then the director of the Ashmolean, oversaw the project, one aspect of which was closing the main doors in favour of a new public entrance. It certainly made sense at the time, not least because the elegant but massive double doors opened onto one of the narrowest parts of the building. As well as a public entrance, the space around the doorway also served as the staff entrance, the reception area and the original museum shop. Cramped, drafty and crowded, Cockerell's grand opening created an uninspiring and inconvenient entrance for a modern museum but the decision to make it redundant was decried by many, in Oxford and beyond, who felt that the building's design demanded that the main doors provide the public access. A decade and half later, with the Ashmolean now reopened after its recent transformation, the doors have been returned to centre stage and the grand entrance is now, perhaps for the first time in a century or more, now genuinely grand.

At a gathering to launch the new Ashmolean building Professor Andrew Hamilton, vice-chancellor of Oxford University, could not resist mentioning the doors. "The expansion of the Ashmolean provides an extension of space that extends the capacity of the museum to show its collection, accept more visitors and extend its teaching," he said. "I am delighted that the two great doors are reopening as the entrance to the museum. They are not just important physically but important symbolically. The entrance represents an opening of the world of culture, of the world of civilisation." Although he had only taken up his post as vice-chancellor three weeks early, Professor Hamilton's delight with the new building was evident. "Having spent many years at Yale, I have had great experience of Yale collections. I can assure you that Yale looks at the Ashmolean with great admiration. It is the oldest museum in the oldest university in the English-speaking world. Great universities have at their heart three core missions: the creation of knowledge and research, the dissemination of knowledge through teaching and the preservation of knowledge. The Ashmolean does all three. Here students are exposed to great cultural experiences of the world. Just as the Bodleian offers teaching from original texts, the Ashmolean offers opportunity for students to be taught from the objects themselves."

If Yale had looked with admiration before, there is a lot more to admire now. The new building has doubled the space available to display the museum's collection, providing 35 new galleries, four temporary galleries, an education centre, three new study centres, new conservation facilities, a loading bay and a new restaurant. It has been not so much an overhaul as a transformation; not so much a reopening as a reinvention.



Christopher Brown: "I want more people here."

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Making a feature of the staircase

This achievement is partly a result of Rick Mather's design and partly a result of a new approach to the display of the collection. As principal of Rick Mather Architects, Mather has established a reputation as one of the world's foremost museum architects. His approach to the Ashmolean design was to create a new building that sits largely within the courtyard behind Cockerell's original. While this means that the £61 million scheme is largely invisible from the street, the design delivers impact for any visitor coming through the doors. For anyone familiar with the old Ashmolean, the impact may be overwhelming. Where once one found one's way into the museum through dark galleries full of dull sculpture now one is confronted by natural light and an airy, open space. The central atrium makes a feature of this light, along with the bridges that connect the galleries and the staircase that leads the visitor to explore the five floors.

"The brief was simple: more space," Mather explained. "The question was: how to do it?" The problems included working with a Grade I listing and providing easy access for a building that works across six different levels. Linking to the Cockerell building and making sure that the new building was not a pastiche of the original were also on the list. The solution provides what is essentially a whole new space that connects to the Cockerell building through only two routes. Within the 10,000 square metres of new gallery space there are two double-height galleries and, perhaps most noticeably, light reaching right through the building.

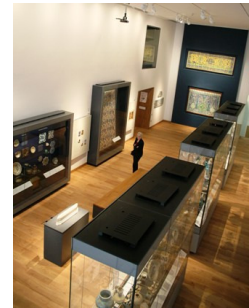
Dr Christopher Brown, director of the Ashmolean, was delighted by Mather's design but also by the work of the designers and curatorial staff that has created a new display concept. "The new building is beautiful, elegant and effective in its use of space," Dr Brown said. "I believe this is Rick Mather's best building to date... The redisplay of the collection has been designed to emphasise cultural contact and exchange rather than cultural differences. It creates unexpected links and raises questions. We wanted to get these collections to speak to each other. The Tradescant collection is the Ashmolean's founding collection. Visitors using Tradescant's collection used to say that it was like going around the world in a day. I think we have gone some way to recreating this experience here."

His mention of the new restaurant as a contributor to the overall running costs of the museum and the importance of having a loading bay that can accommodate articulated vehicles hinted at some of the less than scholastic challenges affecting any museum in the modern commercial environment. The new building will, Dr Brown argued, profoundly enrich the experience of visitors but also meet their expectations.

Visitors familiar with and fond of the original building will be struck by the impact of the new Ashmolean from the moment they pass through the great doors but they will still find the familiar corners and quiet spaces that they remember. It may not feel quite as much like a private museum as it did before but nor will one feel quite so isolated. There will be much more of the collection to see, including some whole sections, such as the textile collection, that have not been on display before. Before its temporary closure in December 2008, the Ashmolean was working with 400,000 visitors a year. The new business plan anticipates 500,000 but the director is hoping that this will prove to be a conservative estimate. "I want more people here," he said. "I want a lot of people to come. It's key to what we're trying to do."



The central atrium



Double-height galleries

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