'Fascinating and illuminating'
PETER ACKROYD

GHOSTS OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

A TRUE STORY OF COLONIAL LOOT AND RESTLESS OBJECTS

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To all those spending an eternity in museum storage.

Dear, dear jackass! Don't you understand that the past
is the present; that without what *was*, nothing *is*?

W E B Du Bois, *The World and Africa* (1947)

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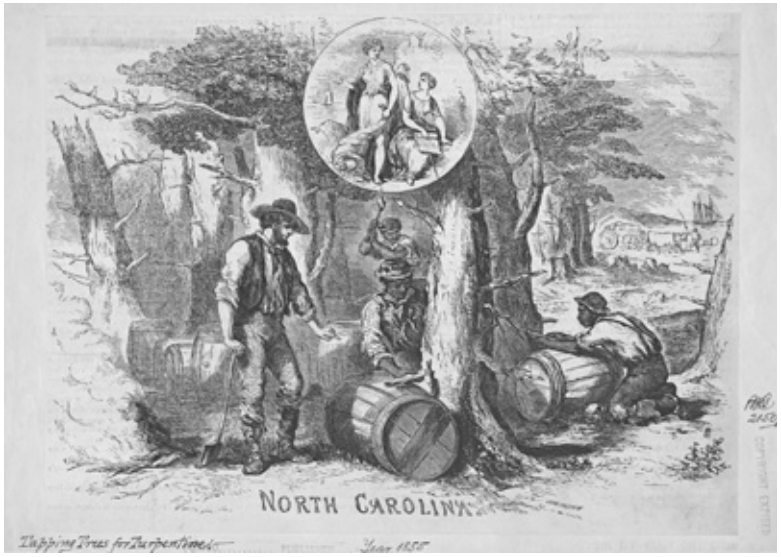


From *Ballou's Pictorial*, 1855.
Image courtesy The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

PROLOGUE

It all began in the pub – the Prince George or "the George" as it's called locally, nestled in the dense network of narrow, leafy backstreets connecting the Dalston and London Fields neighbourhoods of East London. It was the summer of 2015, and I was attending a friend's birthday drinks. Aside from the guest of honour, a curator I was working with at the time, I didn't know anyone present, and the acoustics were such that I couldn't hear a thing. The table of strangers I'd just been introduced to were miming an apparently exhilarating story. I was at a loss, smiling along responsively, all the while trying to puncture the bar-room cacophony of slurred voices, uproarious laughter, the clinking of glasses and the tabling of drinks. I couldn't catch a word to save my life.

I had to know what could possibly have everyone gathered around the table so absorbed in laughter, hanging on to each note of the unfurling yarn. I gave up my poor attempts to read lips and asked my friend what they were on about. She smiled, "We all went to uni together, and while we were studying together, we all worked at the British Museum. They're telling ghost stories."

I thought that was curious. I wanted to make sure that I understood properly; maybe my ears hadn't yet found their proper footing. "You mean, like, the museum itself is haunted?" She looked me square in the eye and nodded. I didn't interject. I didn't want to

trouble those seated at the table by asking them to run the stories back, they seemed to be having such a good time. No longer bothered by the pub noise, I resolved that soon I would learn these stories.

At this point, I'd already lived in London for a decade, and had still never set foot in the British Museum. Early on, in my naivete as a newcomer, I was under the mistaken impression that the British Museum was full of solely British things. Later I learned different but, whatever its contents, like most sensible people I tended to avoid situations where I'd come up against hordes of tourists. I worked in a museum for six years in Washington DC, and later on here and there as an exhibiting artist, but I never much liked museums. They smell faintly of death, and Lord knows there's enough of that in this world as it is, so for a number of negligible reasons, I hadn't yet got around to going.

My hunch then was that there must be a finite number – maybe a half-dozen or so ghost stories that everyone at the British Museum knows, that are often told, and that it'd be a relatively straightforward task to document them. At this time, my art practice was rooted in the study of oral tradition – song, storytelling and much more. I had hundreds of ethnographic field recordings on LP, and was beginning to get my feet wet in sound archives. I also began to develop a fascination with the form of the interview – I paid attention to the way the interviewer carried their ignorance, the fertile silences, what the subject concealed when they decided to reveal information and vice versa. I figured there might even be a few interesting mutations that occurred in the retelling of these ghost stories. I started asking around, to see who I knew with contacts at the museum.

*

At this point, I should probably rewind a little, and tell you about where I'm from and how my early years prepared me for collecting ghost stories at the British Museum.

I was born in North Carolina, a land of many ghosts, where the telling of ghost stories serves as a way of mapping the pain that is lodged in the land, and of paying tribute to those who have gone on, and yet are still with us.

Roanoke Island, located in the northeast of what is now called North Carolina, was the first place in North America to be colonised by the British, in 1584. This Lost Colony was a disaster by any metric. Everyone vanished, whether from starvation, assimilation, conflict or some combination thereof – no one knows why.

The word "Carolina" was derived from *Carolus*, Latin for Charles, in honour of King Charles I (1625–49), but back then the British considered all of the land that wasn't claimed by the French or the Spanish to be a part of one undifferentiated territory known as Virginia, named somewhat perversely for the "Virgin Queen", Elizabeth I (1558–1603). Colonial thinking frequently eroticises unconquered land by comparing it to a woman's body, just waiting to be overtaken and mined mercilessly for whatever value she holds. Needless to say, the many bands of Indigenous people who had already long inhabited this land did not recognise Virginia. They had little reason to concern themselves with these strange, faraway English monarchs, or their lack of experience in matters of love.

The United States of America as it was first formulated was a British colonial project – with the British imposition of 13 slave-holding states, the plantation became the backbone of the country's nascent infrastructure. The plantation system was upheld through extraordinary violence – torture, sexual abuse and killings materialised with dizzying frequency and in ever more jarringly

sadistic forms. All the while the planters played bossman, dressed up, drank and counted money.

Hans Sloane, whose collections formed the nucleus of the British Museum, was a planter too. His fortune was derived in large part from sugar plantations in Jamaica. I never lost sight of this fact as I walked through the British Museum. A planter isn't what the word suggests – they didn't plant a damn thing, but when harvest time came they were the only ones who saw a profit. Sloane's manic 18th-century accumulation would not have been possible without enslaved labour, without extracting the knowledge of the enslaved, or without the brutal destruction and reconfiguration of ecosystems that had sustained humanity for eons.

Beyond the plantation's borders, regimes of policing and other extra-legal forms of vigilante and mob violence were forged in accordance with planters' interests, ensuring that even Black people who had been born free or who had bought their freedom could be pulled back to the plantation, in a strong undertow refusing even a single step forward. In antebellum times, poor whites were commonly arrested for occupying public space on charges of vagrancy, loitering and public drunkenness. The planters feared that an alliance of the poor – poor whites, Native people and enslaved or free Black people – would topple the system that their wealth was premised upon.

My mother's side of the family were poor Irish who probably came over during the Great Famine of the 19th century – my late grandfather's grandparents were sharecroppers in East Carolina, and that's about as far back as anyone has any recollection of. My father's side were Quakers from up north; they left England, where they were considered blasphemers and a threat to the political order, so that they could attend their meeting houses in peace. The Quakers

were against the institution of slavery, and very often functionally tied in to abolitionist networks. I must have been around five years old when I became aware that, although my skin isn't dark, neither were we counted among the descendants of planters who frequented the country clubs and debutante's balls. Before I was able to add or subtract, I understood that catastrophe structured the only world I knew. I've been trying to work out what happened ever since.

As an adult, after years of living in London and getting a better grasp of British culture and politics, I sometimes found it instructive to understand and to frame North Carolina as a former colony, still reeling from the violence of the colonial era and its surviving institutions and actors. For instance, when we see police kill innocent, unarmed people in the United States today, especially Black people, we're reminded of the patterrollers, the armed slave patrols who were the prototype for policing in America, whose obligation was foremost to uphold the plantation system and to defend private property over human life. These extra-judicial killings can in many ways be seen as a legacy of the British-implemented plantation system. When I say that the plantation system is the backbone of the country's infrastructure, I mean not only economically and legally, but – and this is crucial – psychically too. Even after the economy shifted from chattel slavery, the plantation was internalised and unyielding, not only in the collective memory of the people of North Carolina, and in their knowledge of the land, but in the nation's psyche.

Moses Grandy, who was born enslaved in 1786 in Camden, North Carolina, and became a noted abolitionist, describes how when his mother became too old, "worn out" and blind to work the fields,

she was put out in the woods of the Great Dismal Swamp to fend for herself. He'd bring her food after dark, hearing her cries and those of other ailing, arthritic and forsaken elders mingling with the ambient sounds of the forest. Many who sought to escape slavery would spend years living in these same woods as maroons, birthing children, straining tadpoles from puddles for drinking water, and scavenging in muted secrecy, under the unending threat of a return to the plantation, where punishment could exceed death and leave the babies in bondage.

Such trauma doesn't wash away with the first rain. In the sediment of the forest floor, amid the disintegrated shade trees and dead leaves that not so long ago camouflaged makeshift caves, embers of past anguish are still aglow. From my earliest memories, I recall a sense of deep unease in this land, a gnawing feeling that was hard to reconcile with North Carolina's bountiful, florid natural beauty.

In 2016, I was in Eastern Carolina, riding a bike on Oak Island at night. On nights when there was a late low tide, I'd go down around midnight to the freshly firmed sand, where the waves had just receded back into the Atlantic, and there I'd glide along in the darkness, at the edge of the world as the island slept. On my way home, I rode past a long stretch of woods. There I was hit with a vivid impression, and realised that I'd had this same impression for years, whenever I had been to Oak Island, and had repeatedly put it out of my head. It was a vision of someone running out of the woods, swinging an axe with both hands, with all of their body weight arced behind it, looking to split my head open. Now, this isn't something I've thought of anywhere else. I asked myself if it was some sort of

fantasy I'd adopted – having my head split open is not the sort of thing I fantasise about – or whether there was some sort of reality behind this vision. I focused on this image as I would in meditation, hoping to detect if there was any substance to it. I tried to key into it, and the longer I tried the worse I felt, so I left it alone, accelerating as I pedalled on.

Days after leaving Oak Island, I told my mother about the axe-wielding man I saw coming out of the woods, and how it left me feeling disturbed. She told me that the Swains, a still-resident family who like to remind folks that they once owned half of the island, used to run turpentine encampments using enslaved labourers, and that they'd lost it all – their fortune, their operations – after the Civil War ended.

Turpentine is made from distilling the resin of live longleaf pines, hacking a "V"-shape into them with an axe and bleeding the sap, which is then collected and distilled off-site by naval workers. This immediately situated the image of the axe – in these sprawling turpentine encampments axes swung and split non-stop, splinters flying by the light of the sun, and by the moth-shadowed oil lamp and the moon. When conflict arose, the axe was at arm's reach, if it wasn't already in motion.

So, perhaps I had experienced energetic flashes of an axeman from the distant past. Up until Oak Island was established as a township in 1826, it was known as a wildlife refuge, which likely meant untrammelled exploitation and no one to hear the shooting. The "axeman" could have been a foreman gone mad, killing a worker to make an example out of them or to keep from paying them, or it could have been a turpentine labourer in revolt. My feeling was more the former, but one can't be too sure. The island only got paved roads about 50 years ago and nowadays lots of building

is taking place, so it made sense to me that the old energies were perhaps being roused. All I knew for sure was that I had definitely seen and felt *something*, and it wasn't the first or last time I'd pedal into a silent war on Oak Island.

When I was a child, it wasn't unusual to find Native American arrowheads and rifle balls from the Civil War while playing in the dirt. My still-forming fingers gleaned soil from off the rifle balls, disclosing them as misshapen metallic blobs, their shape signifying that they'd passed through something – that is, most likely killed someone. Over a half a million people passed on in the American Civil War. Ole Virginny would not again be confused with virgin land. Even once the blood seeped way down deep in the Earth's soil, defying retinal visibility, she was irrevocably stained. By the onset of the Civil War, the British Crown had long since been run out of the States, and in trademark fashion had washed its hands of it all.

As I got older, I was less compelled by archaeological evidence and increasingly grounded in the study of oral tradition which informed my work as an artist. North Carolina is home to vast bodies of vernacular song and speech that still circulate as living traditions. Field hollers, tobacco auctioneering chants, Jack tales from England, Br'er Rabbit tales from Africa, spirituals and ballads, and an endless, hyper-local body of ghost stories. Not only are the calamities of the colonial and antebellum periods and their aftermath reflected in our stories, but the oral cultures and theologies of the Irish, African, Native American, Scottish, English, German, Swedish and many others all coalesce in ghost lore. The haints are never far off. "Haint" is the vernacular word

for ghost used widely in the Southern United States, effectively meaning "one who haunts".

North Carolina's ghost stories are populated with warring, wandering and undisturbed Native people, lost and starved colonialists, pirates who shot it out with the law or were hanged, African-Americans who died enslaved, on the run or separated from family at the auction block, roustabouts, moonshiners, blockaders, highway robbers and those who died of a broken heart waiting for soldiers, sailors and seasonal labourers who never returned. It goes on and on. They've all been idling for centuries, reliving exit-less catastrophes, pulling passers-by back into former times, trying to get them to remember, to bear witness to what the ghost can't seem to forget, hoping that the witness, in perceiving their plight, will be able to offer a way home.

Haints are known to grandmothers and country schoolteachers, those given to sensing spirits and those with sense enough to know that time operates differently on the other side; it may seem late in the day here, among the hurried world of the living, but there's no expiry date for atonement. Ghosts call us back to the overlooked, to the unspoken, to unmet pleas, reminding us that we cannot simply choose to forget, that if the past isn't done with us, it will call.

That I was born into a world shaped by British colonialism and the long shadow of its plantation system wasn't really on my mind when I first set foot in the British Museum. The way I remember it is that I fell down a hole. I met with overnight and daytime Security staff, Visitor Services, collections managers, Storage assistants, museum assistants, administrators, curators, maintenance workers,

cloakroom and post-room attendants and auxiliary workers of all kinds – surveyors, tour guides and all manner of independent researchers. We met in quiet corners of the museum, in their homes, Back-of-House offices and in the pub.

Once I got home, I'd plug in the headphones and start transcribing the recordings. More memorable than the stories, their phrasings or pace, was the feeling, lightly fossilised in the museum workers' tone of voice, when everything goes sideways and they are no longer sure what's going on. It's the sound of the floor giving way beneath their feet, and the gravity of knowing suspended. These voices took up residence in my body. Every syllable stored away, kneading its meaning in the recesses of my mind.

Once I fell down that hole, as if handling a thorned object in a dark closet, I saw how the museum and my home state were intimately connected. I understood the museum and the plantation as twin pillars of colonial infrastructure. When colonial plantations, mines and labour camps were established, the people who were forced to work in them were in turn forcibly separated from their communal ways of being; their material culture was crated up and shipped off to museums abroad, where it was stored and presented as having been saved from extinction.

And, gradually, I came to understand that museums breed ghosts.

It's an open secret among museum workers that colonial and ethnological museums are prone to hauntings. It is also a matter of consensus across cultures that hauntings arise from untended trauma, festering in its irresolution, and made worse by on-going injustice in the world of the living. Perhaps simply to put material heritage in a museum is to make a ghost of it. After all, the creation of a collection often involves the violent or underhanded extraction

of artefacts from their original settings, and their indefinite exile as a mere object in the cell-like setting of the museum display.

Just as folklore abounds with hauntings by orphans, widows, prisoners, those separated from loved ones or those unable to return home, similar themes are found in the internal folklore of museum employees, among the orphaned objects that are amassed in their workplace. As I collected stories and first-hand accounts, I started to see that by attempting to force a split between an object – a piece of material heritage – and its rightful place in the world; by doing the utmost to sever the spiritual underpinnings of these collections from their longstanding keepers; and by reducing a presence with utility in this world, with people who depend on it, to "art", to a mere catalogued item, museums breed ghosts.

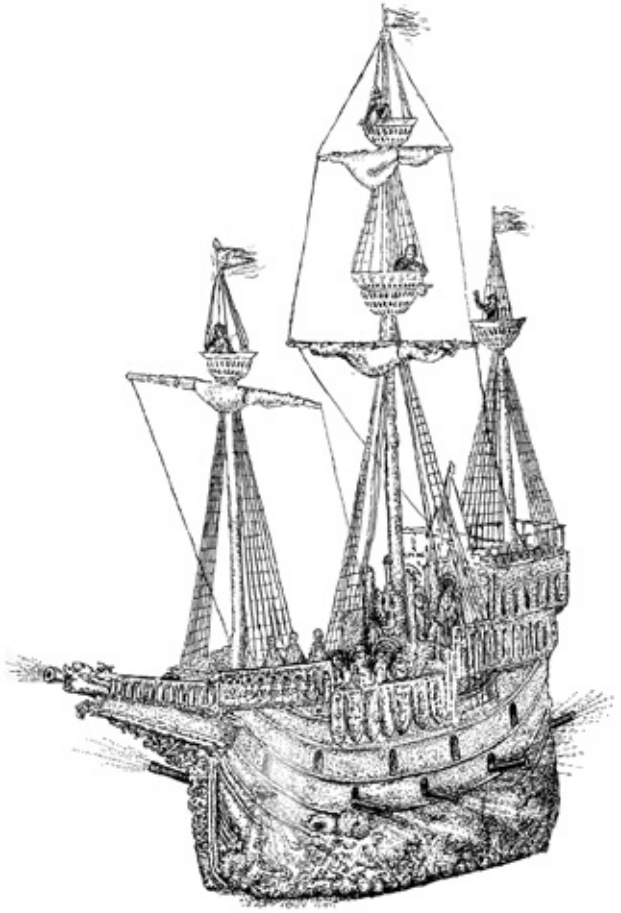
This book is a distillation of what I have learned and experienced over the past seven years of interviewing current and former employees of the British Museum. Some of these staff, who may or may not share my interpretation of the events that they experienced, have requested anonymity and, in a few cases, details have been altered to obscure those who appear within these pages. While I was writing the book, the institution became entangled in its own set of very worldly problems – suspected thefts, sackings, recriminations and resignations abounded. None of this is unconnected – this upheaval, like the staff's experiences of spirits, speaks to something dangerously out of balance in the heart of Bloomsbury. In light of all that has transpired, it's easy to understand why some people felt the need to withhold their identity.

I will take you on a walk through the British Museum: together

we'll survey a side of it that you haven't been shown before – its psychic underbelly. The chapters are organised according to spaces in the museum: gallery by gallery, through the Back-of-House and into the consuming depths of Storage.

If you're the praying type, now is the time to do so. I advise you all to enter the building respectfully, to practise at least as much discretion as you would upon entering a graveyard. Over the years, some visitors have come to mock the idea that spirits are present in the galleries, and have left with injuries. We've come to gather stories, not to trouble errant spirits, so be cool and step lightly.

In the British Museum I found that if you look past the displays and listen to staff, you'll find that the ghosts proliferate unchecked, each new acquisition potentially adding to the hive of psychic unrest. They stage revolts against keepers and warders, and stew in quiet corners and cellars, their exile-induced heartache building and breaking in the maddeningly idle tides of museological time. Many of the stories in these pages indicate that the ghosts simply want people to know that they are there, and so I try to trumpet their cries.



CHAPTER 1

"WHEN YOU PLAY A VIOLIN, THE VIOLIN RETAINS YOUR ENERGY"

With Hans Sloane's death in 1753, the British Museum comes into being. The executors of his will gather to decide where his collection will reside, so that it won't be broken up and it can occasionally be made accessible to scholars. With 63 influential friends of Sloane's acting as trustees, some of the collections are placed in the Bank of England's vaults while his executors approach Parliament with terms.[1]

Parliamentary debate focused on the running costs of the proposed museum, and the value of Sloane's collections, which were the subject of much scepticism and ridicule. Horace Walpole, writer and prime minister's son, wrote that "Sir Hans Sloane valued his Museum at four score thousand, and so would anybody who loves hippopotamuses, sharks with one ear, and spiders as big as geese!" Nevertheless, not wanting to lose the collection to the foreign institutions listed as worthy repositories in Sloane's will, in June of 1753 George II gave royal assent to the British Museum Act, and the government agreed to pay £20,000 to Sloane's daughters for 79,575 objects (not counting the plant specimens in the herbarium), a quarter of Sloane's valuation.[2]

The government settled on Montagu House as the site of the proposed museum. This was a decaying, damp and chilly residence in Bloomsbury, which had not returned to its former glory since surviving a fire in 1686, but the price was right. A national lottery was organised to fund the construction of the museum and the purchase of Sloane's collections, in which £95,194 was put towards the costs of the museum initiative and £200,000 paid out in winnings. Several high-profile figures of the day gamed the lottery by buying thousands of tickets under fake names, reselling them at a mark-up and multifarious other forms of profiteering. When one of the lottery managers was discovered to have grossed £40,000 by illegally purchasing thousands of tickets, he was dismissed from his post and ordered to pay a £1,000 fine. Even as the building was being conceived, before construction was underway, the British Museum was tainted by unethical dealings.

The British Museum island is a foreboding compound set in London's Bloomsbury district, occupying a bit over 5 hectares (about 13 acres) of land. The main entrance on Great Russell Street is its public face, immortalised in numerous films, postcards and tourists' camera rolls. The authoritative Greek revivalist-style building, designed by Sir Robert Smirke and completed in 1852, has a facade of Portland stone, and is lined with 44 columns in the Ionic order, each standing at a lofty 14m (45ft) high. The building is meant to announce the British Museum as the heir to the Western classical tradition, though it looks to me more like a government building with Greek pretensions. Tall iron gates weighing 5 tonnes apiece, with their pointy tips painted gold, mark the museum as not simply a house of learning, but a place of fortified knowledge. Clouds and

crows gather around its glass dome, held in place by cast-iron ribs, a thin veil and a skyward swell that takes on an emerald hue when photographed from above.

Past the iron gates, stanchions delineate queues that snake around the perimeter of the courtyard in a roundabout path towards the entrance, stopping momentarily in a tent, carpeted in blue with folding tables, a rainproof mini-border station. Waiting in the tent, it's a bit like being at the airport, standing between teachers nervously taking stock of their boisterous school groups, Soho residents out for a wander, taciturn researchers, loud Americans and visitors making a pilgrimage to see their own heritage. Rucksacks and purses are given a cursory rummage. "Anything sharp in there, mate?" the Security personnel ask, for what must be the thousandth time today. Those without bags are waved through.

The pediment high above the heads of the entrants, sculpted by Sir Richard Westmacott in 1847, depicts "The Progress of Civilisation", a left-to-right evolutionary mock-up that takes us from humankind's primordial origins through savagery, religion and art, arriving at the enlightened subject of scientific understanding, the museum-goer. The promise of progress hangs over the museum like a warning sign, unheeded by the crowds below, who surge ahead up the front steps.

The interior glass doors of the front entrance are propped open during visiting hours to make way for the continual flow of visitors. As soon as you step into the vestibule, you're at a crossroads of yet more soaring columns, stepping through blurred currents of museum-goers migrating at speed towards the cloakroom on the left and the Egyptian Sculpture gallery just beyond. Folded wheelchairs and scattered fire extinguishers are tucked into the front wall. A Roman caryatid stares down at you from the mid-level of the

South stairs, with stone lions from Turkey lying on either side of the vast chasm of a stairwell, gazing at each other like twins in a pasture. To the right, a gift shop mimics an exhibition space, hawking cheap facsimiles of artefacts on its glass shelves. A massive Perspex donations box shaped like a flying saucer and lit like a fish tank is full of wrinkled notes and pound coins.

Faint sunlight filters through the iron-webbed glass dome of the Great Court, illuminating the Reading Room, a cylindrical internal tower that forms the museum's pinnacle. Visitors take selfies in a landscape dotted with palpably lost giants – the Lion of Knidos, a big, docile, blind-looking marble cat with sunken eyes from 2nd-century Turkey; a regal cedar memorial pole for Chief Luuya'as of the Eagle-Beaver clan of the Nisga'a nation. This pole with majestic crests carved into it once communed with still-rooted cedars in the open air in the Pacific Northwest of North America. It's so tall that you wonder how they ever got it across the sea. There's a commemorative slab of sandstone from around 5th-century Ireland inscribed in Ogham; half of the Pharaoh Amenhotep III's head in quartzite, looking very alive nonetheless. The deep time of the museum is startlingly uneven. You quickly ascertain that the British Museum can't be seen in its totality, or known comprehensively – there's just too much going on. You're in the belly of a whale, bustling with other undigested and unexpelled beings. It's no place for study.

A standalone Perspex kiosk houses a waist-high stack of paper maps of the museum in case you need to steady yourself and re-establish exactly where you are. At this point I could reliably draw a map of the British Museum's floor plans from memory – from the Enlightenment gallery and the Parthenon sculptures flanking each side of the ground floor, to the Upper Egyptian and European

collections occupying the North and South quadrants of the top floor, and most points in between. But truthfully, I don't experience the British Museum in this way, as a place unto itself. The shards of place, the "objects" in the museum, are much more distinct. I experience the British Museum as a void, a black hole. Like a hermit crab, this void has made a home inside a Greek revivalist architectural shell. The void captures other times within it – it has a sinister gravitational pull all its own – but even when I began to understand some of its inner workings, and to hear about the museum as a workplace, the void grew much louder still. With a mere 1 per cent of an "estimated" 8 million artefacts on display, the British Museum is only marginally an exhibition space; in material terms it's mostly a site of disappearance.

There's a raised, circular information desk nearby where three or four Visitor Services staff lean forward, eager to help visitors find their way. A woman who worked at this information desk in 2016 taught me that every museum worker who encounters this phenomenon of ghosts, of haunted museums, however we come to understand it, does so at the level of their labour. For Visitor Services staff, who are tasked with opening and closing the museum, keeping watch over the galleries during visiting hours and interfacing with the visiting public, this sometimes means that gallery-goers come to them after an encounter that's left them shaken, seeking an explanation from the first person they see in uniform.

I came into contact with this Visitor Services staff member after a prompt was posted on the museum's internal message board on my behalf, asking if I could meet staff with knowledge of the British Museum's ghosts. She agreed to meet so long as she was granted anonymity, as she was worried the museum might not look kindly on those who air its secrets to outsiders. We sat on a stone bench on

the front porch during her break and had coffee in the long shadows of the late-afternoon sun. She was curious as to why I was collecting the museum's ghost stories and apologised for only having one first-hand experience to share.

In 2015 a Dutch couple approached the information desk in the Great Court with one of their phones out. Visitors frequently come to the desk phone in hand, flashing an image of the object they wish to be directed to, and so my interlocutor greeted them expectantly. This couple, however, was not asking after the location of an object or gallery, but an explanation for something unusual that appeared in a photograph they'd just taken.

They breathlessly explained that they had just come from Rooms 38 and 39 – the Clocks and Watches gallery, two dimly lit rooms of tall, stately timekeepers swaying hypnotically, alternately ticking together in quiet unison and brimming with discordant, ceremonious clanging. They foregrounded the camera-phone image by noting that it was an overcast day, and that no one save themselves had been present. That is to say, there was no sunlight to stimulate the photographic distortions resulting from interfacing panes of glass, nor any stray figure in the gallery whose image could have been caught up in the gallery's reflecting tangle of glass cases. The couple showed the Visitor Services worker every photograph that they'd taken in the Clocks and Watches gallery in sequence; each shot was "normal", until they reached the Mechanical Galleon.

The Mechanical Galleon is a nef, an elaborate article of clockwork automata in the form of an ornamental warship. Crafted in 1585 by Hans Schlottheim of Augsburg, southern Germany,

this nef once belonged to Augustus, Elector of Saxony. In the 16th century, rich heads of state were enraptured by warships, the technological revelation that brought them their wealth and enabled European expansion. They commissioned miniature warships as monuments to their own power, to be admired as table-top displays or, in the case of this wheeled galleon, rolled across a lengthy banquet table for Augustus to show off to his guests. Its automata include an inbuilt music box in the form of a wind-up organ below deck. Soldiers perch at the bow and atop its hoisted sails, keeping watch while 16 cannons poke out of its sides, just above the waterline. Centuries ago, these mini-cannons were stuffed with gunpowder and made to fire before guests by attendant servants. Sitting on a golden throne in the midst of a raised platform is a miniature Rudolf II, the Holy Roman Emperor, encircled by a procession of the seven electors (including Augustus of Saxony) who appointed him.

The Mechanical Galleon is a model of an empire's inner circle, deterministic as a model of heavenly bodies in orbit, divinely engineered to steer a sea vessel that would have been readily understood during its time as a metaphor for the state, floating as if by birthright above the world whose labour and resources fuel its ascent. At the Emperor's feet is a cyclopean clock face, denoting that nothing is more foundational to the imperial endeavour than the power to shape time. The imagined trade winds that would have propelled this nef were the type to carve out seasons of mass labour across continents, time zones to coordinate harvest and trade calendars, and leisure time for its planners.

When the Dutch couple photographed the Mechanical Galleon,

a figure appeared – glaring back in sharp focus, as if a reflection from the surface of the glass case. It was a woman, or perhaps a young girl, a bit "like a dwarf". She smiled mischievously, "as if she'd just told a joke". Clumps of her hair were missing, as if they'd fallen out. She had strange clothes on – the warder was confident that they were from the 16th century, that is, consistent with the period of the Mechanical Galleon. The warder was stunned by the Dutch couple's approach, and double-checked that there hadn't been a child in the gallery; they were adamant that they had been completely alone and, from the rhythm they were tapping out on the counter, it was clear they wanted answers. It was a digital photograph, the warder thought to herself: if it were film it could be a double exposure, but this is not so easily explained.

"You said she was smiling as if she'd just told a joke?" I asked, tickled by this detail.

"Yeah, maybe like, 'I'm going to be in your picture!' ", confirming with her own mischievous laughter that the figure appeared to be photo-bombing the tourists. I laughed along with the warder on the museum's sunlit front porch, but the Dutch couple had found no humour in the incident.

"And so they asked me, 'What do you think? Because you know, we can assure you that it was empty – *no one* was around . . .' "

This is a dilemma familiar to several museum workers I've spoken with. They're put on the spot, asked to explain an anomalous, sometimes frightful photograph taken only a minute before and that they've only just laid eyes on. The warders would like to comfort the visitor, but they too are baffled, and constrained by their position as a representative of the museum, "What can you

say to that?" the warder asks rhetorically, bewildered. They stare at the photograph alongside the visitor, struggling to improvise a response, until the visitor realises that no words of comfort will be forthcoming, at which point they thank the warder and head for the exit.

This particular Visitor Services worker would not be caught flat-footed. "I sent them to the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain. It was founded by Arthur Conan Doyle, who was very fond of ghosts." Perhaps there someone more qualified, someone whose training covered the behaviour of ghosts, could be of better service to them.

Most of the museum workers I've spoken with do not self-identify as believing in ghosts. They're alert, vigilant that anything out of the ordinary could constitute a security breach. If an alarm goes off without apparent cause, if a visitor is seen in a space where they shouldn't be or an entranceway is blocked or left unbarred against operational protocol, the incident has to be pursued until a cause is established. What does seem to be a matter of consensus among museum employees is that "objects hold energy", an oft-repeated formulation that encompasses and bypasses questions of belief, while acknowledging the power of the material heritage that dominates their workspace. Haydyn Williams, a former research assistant at the British Museum, put it that, "Objects carry memories, same as people do. They inherit feelings, if you like, recorded in them."

The warder at the information desk positioned herself on the permissive end of agnosticism, recognising that the senses have their limitations. "I don't exclude anything because you cannot see it, or

you cannot touch it. When you play a violin, the violin retains your energy, and the energy of people who've played the violin before, so I don't exclude that there can be something attached to an object, or a particular environment. Maybe that was someone near the clocks at the time that they were made, but to be honest I don't know."

She asked if I'd like to go and see the Mechanical Galleon. In time I learned that when a museum worker offers to take you to the site of a haunting, additional information comes to the surface. As we got up from the bench on the front porch and made our way up the South stairs, towards the Clocks and Watches gallery, she told me that in addition to her conviction that the costume in the photograph was from the 16th century, in Spanish paintings of that time, particularly in the works of Velázquez, we find little people as jesters, hired to entertain at the royal court. This practice stretched across European gentry in the medieval period, and the physique, costume and playful smile of the figure in the photograph suggested to the warder that they may have indeed been a jester, someone who once shared a place at court with the Mechanical Galleon and who performed such pranks as a career during her earthly life.

"I still remember that face," the warder laughed, drawn back to that peculiar smile as she peered around the glass that holds the Mechanical Galleon. Searching, as if for a silk strand of an arachnid's web, or a scratch in the faultless gleam of the vitrine, neither materialising, and no sly smile.

I heard this story early in the course of my interviews with museum staff. In digesting it, I was struck that at first glance the Mechanical Galleon is a fundamentally ornamental object, without any apparent sacred function, or known history of trauma or theft.

If the Mechanical Galleon is unquiet, the same could be true of any of the millions of so-called objects held here.

The warder's observation that "When you play a violin, the violin retains your energy, and the energy of people who've played the violin before" stayed with me. This phrase stood as an early and eloquent explanatory framework for why we experience museums as haunted, and a testimony that some notes carry far and can't be unplucked.