Dodos and Dark Lanterns takes us on a fascinating historical journey through the Ashmolean Museum’s history and subsequent transformations, with Berry highlighting the historical facts and figures that led to this collection’s genesis, growth, and preservation. The Ashmolean is Britain’s oldest public museum and is home to the University of Oxford’s dazzling collection of art and archaeology. It is named for Elias Ashmole, an enthusiastic antiquarian who established the museum itself, though it originally began with a father and son, both named John Tradescant.

Beginning as a cabinet of curiosities, relics, and exotic rarities collected from the Tradescants’ limited travels, the collection has grown extensively over the course of a few hundred years, into an assembly of objects that captures ancient British history, as well as art history, archaeology, and natural history worldwide. Over time, various wealthy, famous, and educated donors, scientists, and antiquarians contributed large personal collections, libraries, and their own research to the museum’s vaults. Eventually, the museum expanded its space to accommodate these contributions, including new galleries and classrooms where objects could be used as teaching collections.

Within the last decade, the Ashmolean has intentionally installed their objects in relation to one another, effectively merging large and small civilizations, East and West, ancient and new. In this way, the current keepers of the Ashmolean seek to sustain cultural relevancy and excite the mind with fascinating pieces that represent our collective history.
Discussion: Questions for the Author

1. How did you get started at Oxford and when did your enthusiasm for historical objects begin?
2. What intrigued you most about the Ashmolean’s collection? Do you have any favorite pieces?
3. Could you tell us a bit about your experience with museum interpretation?

Discussion: Questions for the Club

1. We often think of the past as a known territory, full of established facts, and yet the continuous expansion of our historical understanding creates new lenses through which to view the past. Was there an interpretation of the Ashmolean items that you found particularly interesting?

2. The advent of the dictionary froze the English language and created right and wrong ways of spelling. Do you think museums freeze the knowledge they convey, or keep it open to the integration of new discoveries, new thoughts?

3. ‘Universal’ or ‘encyclopedic’ collections sprung up all over Europe in the 17th century, as Europeans colonized large swaths of Africa, the Middle East, and the New World. The theoretical aim of an encyclopedic collection (sometimes turned into a museum) is to represent cultures and the natural environment worldwide, to engender a sense of shared human history (James Cuno, *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum*, 2011). Do you feel that the Ashmolean’s collection is successfully encyclopedic?

Further Reading


*Raphael: Drawings selected from the collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*. Published by the Ashmolean Museum, 1982. NC 257.R3 094