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Candlin, Fiona (2011) Night shift at the British Museum. In: Night Shift Seminar Series, 2011, Birkbeck, University of London, UK. (Unpublished)

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## Night Shift at the British Museum

Mark O'Neil, the Head of Glasgow Museums recently commented that museum studies is preoccupied with curation and conservation, and rarely examines other roles and tasks that are essential to running a museum such as finance, catering, project management, cleaning, IT and security. In this paper I consider the night-shift at the British Museum, exploring how the warders come to know the Museum and what they know of it.

Every evening, apart from Fridays when it stays open late, the attendants start to clear the British Museum at quarter past five and, by five-thirty, the galleries are closed.<sup>1</sup> At six o'clock the staff ask any visitors lingering in the Great Court to leave and then re-admittance to the building begins. Between six and nine o'clock the Museum is neither closed nor fully open to the public: there are evening lectures for Friends of the Museum, previews for teachers, journalists, and patrons, Birkbeck evening classes, openings, and corporate receptions. Once the classes and events are finished, the warders make sure that nobody has inadvertently been left behind and check that anyone working late has gone home. By 10 o'clock, when the night shift starts, the security staff are the only people left in the building.

The British Museum night-warders work from 10pm to 6am six nights out of every eight.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the shift two warders are assigned to guard the front entrance, a job which is perceived to be a soft option because the massive gates are locked and the warder can sit in the tiny gatehouse, next to a heater, listening to the radio, reading, or knitting as they prefer. Only very rarely does someone attempt to scale the walls, and then out of mischief or idiocy rather than with any serious intention of entering the building. Burglars have generally taken different routes.

The other warders spend much of the night walking. Their principal duty is to patrol the Museum's buildings, which is a substantial undertaking. There are ninety-four galleries distributed over eight levels and across two buildings. In some parts of the Museum, plant-rooms make up a ninth level. At the front of the building are two large wings where the curators once lived and which now house the Directors' suite, board rooms, and numerous departments including security, education and interpretation, finance, marketing, IT. The department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas which was a late addition to the Museum's collections departments and which was previously located in the separate Museum of Mankind is also squeezed in here. Circling around the main building and the two wings is an internal road which is used for deliveries and beyond that, forming a square around the edge of the site, are rows of Georgian houses which belong to the Museum but face out onto the streets of Bloomsbury. In total, the Museum occupies some thirteen

acres of land, an area which the security team has divided into six, each warder covering three sections on a nightly basis, looping round the buildings, opening every door, checking each room and passageway, and spending five or more hours on their feet.

These routes are complex. Unlike modern buildings which have a public and a private quarter, which are linked by one or at most two connecting doors, the early nineteenth-century building designed by Robert Smirke was planned so that each department's offices, libraries and student room were grouped around the associated galleries. The bulk of the Museum was and to a large extent still is mapped by subject area and not by function or role, so curators must cross gallery floors (or take back routes) to visit colleagues from other departments. This design separated and isolated the departments and has no doubt contributed to an institutional landscape that one keeper compared to a series of Tuscan Hill forts - well-defended fiefdoms that for many years were engaged in battles for territory and supremacy. In the years since its opening, the Museum has been further complicated by subsequent adaptations and additions. In 1857, only four years after this grand museum was ostensibly finished, the famous round reading room was built in the central courtyard and the attempt to create more galleries, offices and storerooms has continued ever since. Mezzanines have been built, rooms divided and new galleries erected inside the old rooms, their white modern walls hanging inside larger, wood-panelled galleries, leaving odd passageways and crawl spaces between the two faces of the Museum.

The departmental fiefdoms, old and new galleries, ad-hoc office spaces and service areas are connected through some three-and-a-half thousand doors and an intricate web of corridors. In the Enlightenment gallery two sections of a long bookcase swing open to reveal utilitarian passages. In the upper Greek and Roman galleries there is a sequence of identical large wooden doors each of which open onto very different areas. Only an insider would know which door leads to a small storeroom and which goes to a neighbouring gallery although an attentive visitor might spot hidden door-bells, an indication that this particular doorway leads to departmental offices. Due to the complexity of the building, curators and other staff often stick to one specific route from the key pound to their office and to other sites that they regularly visit, but the warders need to know all the paths through the Museum and how to vary them if a public event or building work makes them impassable (as is frequently the case). There is a map of the Museum but being devised for visitors it only shows the galleries that are currently in use and so the warders need to learn their way by walking the routes.

The night-warders work in pairs and until they can find their own way, newcomers are teamed with experienced staff. Some of the new warders take Dictaphones, recording directions which they will later try and learn by heart, others draw maps as they go round or from memory

afterwards. Sometimes the older guards help newcomers by telling stories about the places they walk through, and in so doing, instruct them in a past history of the labyrinth. 'The Rifle Range was here in the North East basement', they remark, 'the Henry Hooke cup for shooting is in the canteen now. Hooke was at Rourke's Drift.' The old mortuary, the old medieval tile room, the departmental photographic units, in-house design team and the bindery moved or gone for good; the director's flat which remained in use until Neil McGregor took over and turned it into board rooms. 'Suited the last incumbent' they comment and speculate on the reasons why he wanted on-site accommodation. 'From here to the Percival David room used to be Maps and Egerton' they tell me, 'behind us was Music. Beautiful rooms, collections moved out with the British Library'. The names they use and which do not appear on visitors' maps also bear witness to the past museum: The Botanical Staircase, the Malt Corridor, Banksian room, Cracherode room, even the term 'house-keys' echoes down the years from when curators still lived onsite or even perhaps from Montagu house, the gentleman's residence and original British Museum.

Expert way-finders and keepers of stories, the warders patrol the Museum throughout the night. They take their time, walking purposefully but without hurry. Each route is supposed to take so long and there is little else to do apart from sit in the bare common room and listen to the World Service. Walking around the Museum, they are on the alert for the smell of gas and chemicals; they check offices for heaters left on and for leaks - these being something of a perennial problem, especially in the winter and particularly in the Fleet corridor which is named for the river that flows through the basement in two large steel pipes. They listen for anyone who may be locked in which given the maze of the corridors and the variety of locks, does happen every now and again, and they look for the untoward although they very rarely find anything changed or out of place. Along their route, the warders call the control desk from their radios or from the various telephones secreted in panels or hung on walls and, using the names and numbers of the galleries interchangeably, they ask for the alarms to be turned on and off: 'Clear 95, Korean, 35. Can we have the East Turret please?' Then they progress onwards, unlocking and relocking each door as they go. As the night wears on some of the warders linger to inspect carvings that are kept on curators' desks, examine the shelves of folios and boxes left out in students' rooms, and flip through books or read the notices in departmental corridors. In doing so, they accrue an astonishingly detailed overview of the Museum's business – the whereabouts of the Goya prints, the insurance and shipping costs of a particular artefact, the disappointing attendance figures for the Book of the Dead exhibition, whose publishing record is coming on nicely, and which departments hold the most glittering receptions. Encompassing the economic infrastructure of the Museum, the gas plants, internet cabling, the biographies of its staff and cleaning rotas, the warders' patrols cover the fluctuations of institutional

influence, personal failures and success, they cut through the departmental divisions and through the public and private faces of the Museum.

Most of the night patrols are carried out by torchlight. Some lights remain on because departments have requested them for events and the over-ride system has not been re-set. One warder apologises to a display of Egyptian skeletons, 'sorry chaps, I'm afraid you've got the lights on for the night'. Other lights cannot be switched off because their controls are inside display cases that the warders cannot open without express permission. Even in moments of emergency, warders are supposed to wait for the curatorial staff to arrive before they open or move any exhibits or cases. 'The Victoria and Albert Museum is always dark at night. When you go past its windows are black', another warder remarks, bemoaning the wasted electricity and their inability to switch the lights off. Lighting at the British Museum is linked to more than one power structure. In most rooms, though, the lights are already off or turned down and the patrol proceeds through a series of twilight and dark spaces.

The degree of darkness varies between rooms. In the Egyptian Sculpture gallery which is known to the warders as 'Room 4', the low lights of the Great Court filter in through interior windows set high in the walls, and the massive stone Pharaohs' heads and figures create huge black silhouettes in the gloom. The Prints and Drawings room is very dark as are the Japanese rooms but ironically the darkest room of all is the Enlightenment gallery. Until one's eyes adjust, the edges of the room are lost in dense darkness and walking into the gallery is like entering a cavern where the size is intuited and listened for, rather than seen. The night-warders tightly focus the beams of their torches to create bright spots of light but this also limits their view because the narrow beams can only illuminate one small area at a time. If they wish to look at the collections they must do so object by object, or even section by section, moving their torchlight across the surfaces of a Lycian tomb or colossal statue. This slow and cumulative way of seeing recalls the early twentieth-century art historian Alois Riegl's concept of tactile vision, named because it is more akin to touching objects bit by bit than to perceiving them with a glance.<sup>3</sup> Although the Enlightenment period prized objective, rational vision divorced from bodily sensation, the night-warders must see feelingly, taking their time to inspect things that remain in partial shadow.

The museum is very quiet at night. External sounds are distanced by the deep forecourt, perimeter buildings and internal road, and are further muffled by walls that are three feet thick. Yet, the museum is not silent. A video presentation that is part of the Book of the Dead exhibition is on continuous loop and the voice-over recalls the visitors' daytime conversations. The air-conditioning hums surprisingly loudly, the night-warders' footsteps echo on the stone floors and the metal security doors rattle when pulled to and fro. In the East and West turrets the warders often hear

doors clanking on the levels above or below them, but knowing no-one else is there, they assume that the noises are caused by changes in air pressure. Gusts of air whistle through the doorways between the Duveen and the Lycian galleries, cold blasts that sweep over and around the warders. These are also attributed to differences in air pressure. Throughout the night the building creaks and breathes, expanding and contracting with gradual changes in temperature.

The shifts in warm and cold air are surprisingly noticeable as the warders pass from one space to the next. The turrets and the main museum staircases are freezing while the wood-floored and case-lined Enlightenment room is warm, as are the carpeted and expensively fitted-out Japanese galleries. Moving from a chilly Room 13 into the adjacent Egyptian sculpture gallery where the heat rises from the original floor vents, the duty manager comments that the patches of cold puts some of the night-warders on edge. 'Why', I ask, as he hesitates slightly, 'do you mean there may be ghosts?' 'Yes' he replies 'that's what some people think' and he tells me that one night, his route through the Museum was inexplicably barred. Unable to open an unlocked door, he tried another route but the lift he took juddered to a halt, trapping him there. 'Are we having fun tonight?' he had called out, addressing the unseen spirits, simultaneously making a joke and a plea.

Despite being surrounded by warmer galleries, it is always cold in the area next to the winged human-headed bull from Nimrud, a gateway guardian designed to protect the palace against demonic forces. One of the warders has heard scratching there, which she attributes to the Roman soldiers who, millennia ago, scratched a simple board game into the base of the carving. She also tells me that some warders hurry through this area and that they also avoid any inspection of the Arched Room where cupboard doors and lights sometimes swing by themselves, but that the scariest place is at one end of the ethnography library. 'There's a bad feeling down there', she says. 'The other warders think the same. They pretend to be macho but they don't like it either'. The mummy galleries though, don't raise a shiver, since it is not these desiccated bodies that move or haunt, but the people who have lived and worked in this place; the butler from Montagu house guarding his wine cellars, the book-readers, warders, students and curators. These sensations and manifestations also fall within the night-warders' compass.

Towards morning the third and last patrol of the night leads out onto the narrow steel walkways that circle the roof. The streetlights and cloud-cover have turned the winter sky a grey-orange and we can see over the interior road and perimeter wall to the backs of hotels, their coloured curtains drawn closed. A few windows are lit, suggesting jet-lagged guests, late night revellers, residents who are afraid of the dark, or early-risers. From another walkway, the high, upper floors of the Senate House tower are oddly close to hand. These sites of day-time life are disconcertingly proximate. In here, barricaded by the fence, forecourt, walls and doors, the Museum

seems to float free from the rest of London, the tourists and students, universities and hotels and the daily occupations of the city. As the night-warders walk, covering miles and miles of corridors and crannies, the Museum grows, becoming huge, self-sufficient and all-encompassing. It is a shadowy universe, its small worlds of galleries revolving in the dark. One could pass a quiet lifetime walking these paths and some of the night-warders do just that, spending years learning its dark constellations, dense shadows, locks and passcodes, its maps of temperature and sound and feeling.

Fiona Candlin

London, 2011

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to the British Museum security team for permitting me to accompany the warders on night patrols and for their generosity in sharing their experiences. In particular I would like to thank Mike Barnett, Adrian Brake, Tony Brueton, Andy Matthewman, Peter and Karen.

<sup>2</sup> Recently shift patterns have been changing and a few warders are beginning to work both night and day shifts.

<sup>3</sup> Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985). 22-4