

Subject: Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery (Glasgow) [exhibition review]  
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Dr *Who?* That's the question currently bothering Glasgow's Hunterian Museum. The answer is Dr William Hunter: collector, anatomist, man-midwife, author, researcher, Academician, superstar. These words appear above seven display cases each containing one of the many artefacts that Hunter bequeathed to Glasgow University on his death in 1783. A museum was eventually built to house these things in 1807. Now, exactly two hundred years later, it has been revamped.

Before the refurbishment awareness of the man behind the collection was poor, even amongst staff and students of Glasgow University where Hunter studied. He went on to become one of the eighteenth century's leading physicians, supervising the delivery of six children to George III and Queen Charlotte. His main claim to fame can be summed up by one particularly striking object: the specimen of a uterus with a five month old foetus still inside. Hunter discovered that the woman's womb was pointing backwards – with fatal consequences for both mother and baby. His anatomical research helped saved countless women from a similar fate.

Mhairi Douglas, visitor services manager at the Hunterian, says that they thought long and hard about whether to include this potentially disturbing object in the new display. They decided to because of its importance to Hunter's career. It features in his portrait painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds hanging nearby. This link between art and science is perfect given that Hunter became the Royal Academy of Arts' first Professor of Anatomy in 1768. He went on to assemble a wonderful collection of paintings, prints, drawings, coins, books and curiosities. The latter included *Smugglerius*, a superb life-size plaster cast of a flayed man (on loan from the Royal Academy). This and many artworks are on show until December in the Hunterian Art Gallery, housed in another building on the university campus.

The displays at both the art gallery and the museum are intended to present Hunter 'in his historical context'. This means that all visitors – even the smallest – should be well equipped to answer the question: 'Dr Who?' These words appear above a section aimed especially at young visitors. The vitrines are positioned close to the floor and colourful, easy to read speech bubbles pick out some remarkable specimens – a favourite being a puffed-up and very prickly porcupine fish.

This fish appears in one of two cases which act like 'arms' embracing the first thing the visitor sees: the skeleton of a young Indian elephant. On either side are carefully selected objects under the title 'Weird and Wonderful'. This is intended to whet the appetite of visitors and pose more questions than answers. The number of objects is kept low here, encouraging the visitor to linger over each thing. This is in contrast to the cases on either side which are packed full of stuff. This shows a really intelligent awareness of the need to vary the type of display in order to sustain the attention of a non-specialist whilst not excluding the

academic expert. It is, in other words, both educational and entertaining. This means that it stays true to Hunter's first museum and anatomy school, described in 1789 as a 'repository... for the instruction and wonder of the present, as well as of future ages'.

Part of this 'repository' is today housed in Gilbert Scott's monumental Victorian Gothic building at the heart of Glasgow University. The objects are clustered around a central 'spine' running down one of the main halls. This tells the story of collectors who, like Hunter, bequeathed things to the museum. On either side are themed sections looking at such topics as archaeology, vertebrate evolution and the Mediterranean world.

The fact that one can talk of the 'arms' and 'spine' of the display is indicative of the theatricality of the hang. This is entirely in keeping with the nature of William Hunter, who was famous for his brilliant anatomy lectures. When he tried to retire from teaching his students petitioned him to stay (something I'm sure many museum studies students would do if their lecturers ever threatened to quit).

Another excellent theatrical touch is the monitor in front of the Indian elephant. It plays a sequence of time-lapse photographs showing welders putting together the plinth on which the elephant stands. This is followed by the curators doing the same thing, only this time with elephant bones. We watch as they take them down from the old display and reassemble them in the new. This montage of photos might be a simple idea, but it brings the whole collection to life. It reminds us that that the museum is a dynamic, changing place, not just a heap of forgotten objects left to gather dust in glass cases.

The life of the museum is also apparent from the touch-screen interactives. These reveal that, when it opened in 1807, it was the very first public institution to feature a gallery of paintings (predating Dulwich Picture Gallery by eight years). We also learn that it cost the equivalent of £6 to enter. Today it's free. But other things have not changed all that much. The basement of the original museum featured a 'Hall of the Elephant'. That the same creature still plays a starring role is another example of the curators being true to the heritage of the Hunterian.

By focusing on William Hunter in this anniversary year the museum has made the most of its rich and fascinating past. And it very cleverly uses this to suggest that it could have an even more exciting future. The section on the museum's extensive collection of Roman sculpture, for example, looks forward to 2008 and UNESCO's possible designation of the Antonine Wall as part of the 'Frontiers of the Roman World Heritage Site'. The museum plans to convert the university's visitor shop into an interpretation centre telling how this defensive structure was built in AD 142-144, just to the north of the more famous Hadrian's Wall.

More ambitious still are the hopes of the former director – Evelyn Silber – in her postscript to a book published to mark the bicentenary.\* She dreams of a day when the Hunterian collections are brought together under one roof to create an institution capable of rivalling Glasgow's Burrell Collection. Everyone who visits the Hunterian should wish them well in this endeavour, especially when one learns that everything they have achieved in this latest redisplay has been realised in-house and at a cost of £750,000. This is doubly remarkable given that the Hunterian has faced a seemingly endless series of funding crises. The latest

round of cut backs led Silber to resign as director in 2006. Despite this change of leadership and a reduction in resources, the Hunterian has still managed to deliver a coherent redisplay on time and at a comparatively low cost. The management of Glasgow University ought to repay this superb resourcefulness and resilience by safeguarding its future. It might start by fixing the roofs of the current museum and art gallery – both of which were hit by leaks on the day that I visited.

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\* Lawrence Keppie, *William Hunter and the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, 1807-2007* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007). See also Peter Black (ed.) *'My Highest Pleasure' – William Hunter's Art Collection* (Paul Holberton Publishing, 2007).