

New things set in many landscapes: aspects of the Museum of Scotland

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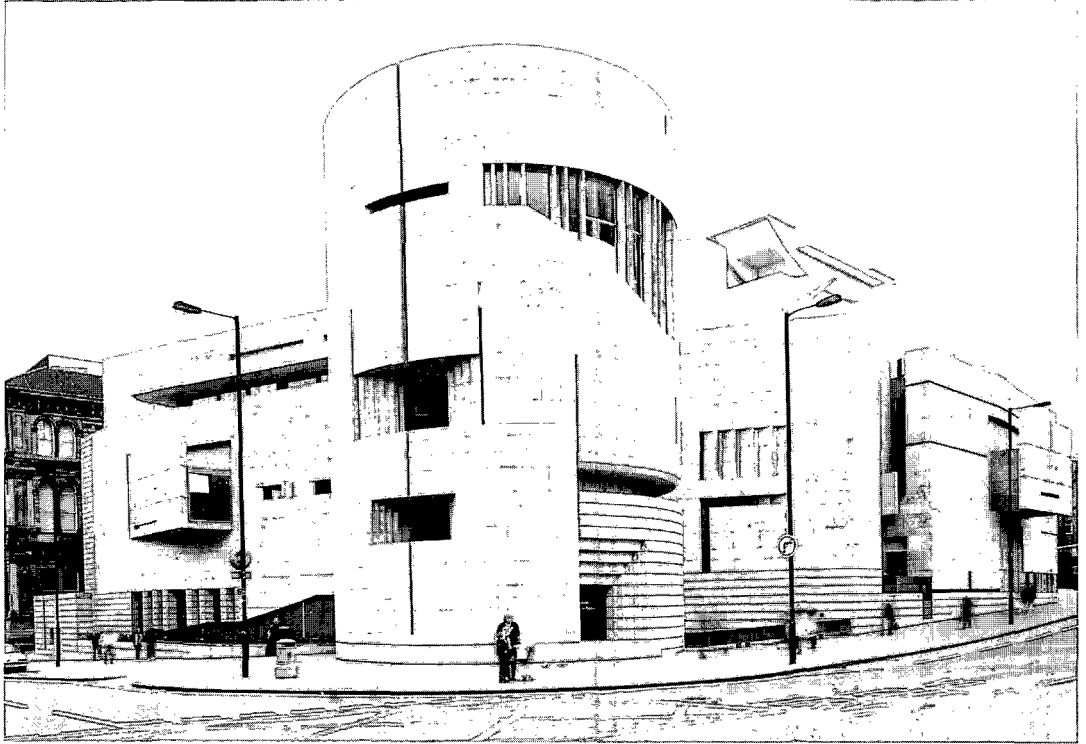
In opening the Museum of Scotland¹ on St Andrew's Day 1998, HM The Queen brought closure to the long quest for a suitable home for the Scottish national collections. Arguably, the quest has been pursued for over a century and Fellows of our Society, among others, have always been actively involved in it. But the sheer length of this journey has meant that those travellers have inhabited many landscapes. Edifices from time to time were described and sought; necessarily, they were always conceived of in terms of the contemporary landscape. Had any of these constructs become reality it would not, of course, have been the occupant of a single landscape but of many landscapes, just as the Museum of Scotland now is.

Landscape in this situation is, as Daniels & Cosgrove (1988, 1) define it, 'a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings'. In other words, landscape is here to be construed as context. Of course, unusually, the surroundings under consideration are a complete nation — Scotland — and the whole of its past insofar as that past found a three-dimensional expression. And since the importance of context for understanding is a key message throughout the Museum of Scotland it seems appropriate to consider the museum's realization within a contextual or landscape framework.

A suitable beginning is the museological landscape of which the new museum has become part. This is far from homogeneous and is difficult to describe effectively. The titles of two articles sum up the situation admirably. When preparations were well under way a piece appeared entitled 'Are museums still necessary?' (Watkins 1994) and in the months before the opening, another asked 'Should permanent exhibitions be killed off as soon as possible?' (Hudson 1998). Since all of our efforts over nearly a decade had been driven by an unqualified belief in the importance of museums and the value of the permanent exhibition, we were clearly not inhabiting exactly the same stretch of country as these two commentators (although it should be emphasized that neither commentator wholly endorsed the implied answer to his question). We can perhaps be characterized as skulking in the backwoods when we should have been on the plains seeking the promised land, but initial responses from our visitors suggest that many find our show enjoyable and worthwhile.

In many respects the building of a new national history museum in a developed western nation is at odds with contemporary expectations. Such museums largely formed part of the great 19th-century affirmation of nationhood and consequently most European states acquired a national history museum at that time. Almost alone, Scotland, which through the initiative of our Society had been assembling collections since 1780, had failed to provide an appropriate building

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ILLUS 1 The Museum of Scotland viewed from George IV Bridge

in which such collections might be displayed. By the second half of the 20th century the usual solution to the need for new museum or heritage accommodation was to refurbish an abandoned but historically important building. Museums have played key roles in the 'new uses for old buildings' movement. So the decision instead to commission a new building added significantly to the sense of importance which the Board of Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland had already attached to the project.

Erecting a major new building in an historic city is, of course, to change the landscape in the most obvious manner. An architectural competition helped to avoid the temptation for pastiche exteriors, although the issue was not without its resonance for the new building, as Prince Charles' resignation from the Patrons Committee demonstrated. Once Benson & Forsyth had been confirmed as winners of the competition it was clear that the new museum would be an uncompromisingly modern building. Notwithstanding the numerous quotations from Scotland's architectural past and homage to dead heroes, the building is entirely of its time. It is a sensitive and important addition to Edinburgh's cityscape.

But what does the exterior tell us of the intellectual and symbolic landscapes occupied by a new national history museum (illus 1)? The dominant imagery is that of fortification and defence; even the windows that project from the facade might be thought to echo the defensive desire for oversailing positions of dominance. The impression is very much 'museum as castle' or more prosaically and less attractively, 'museum as safe-deposit box'. This harmonizes with the concept of housing the nation's treasures which was an important element in the arguments for the new

building. But perhaps it reflects subconsciously a sense of access as a privilege not a right. At the very least the feeling is very much more of protection than accessibility.

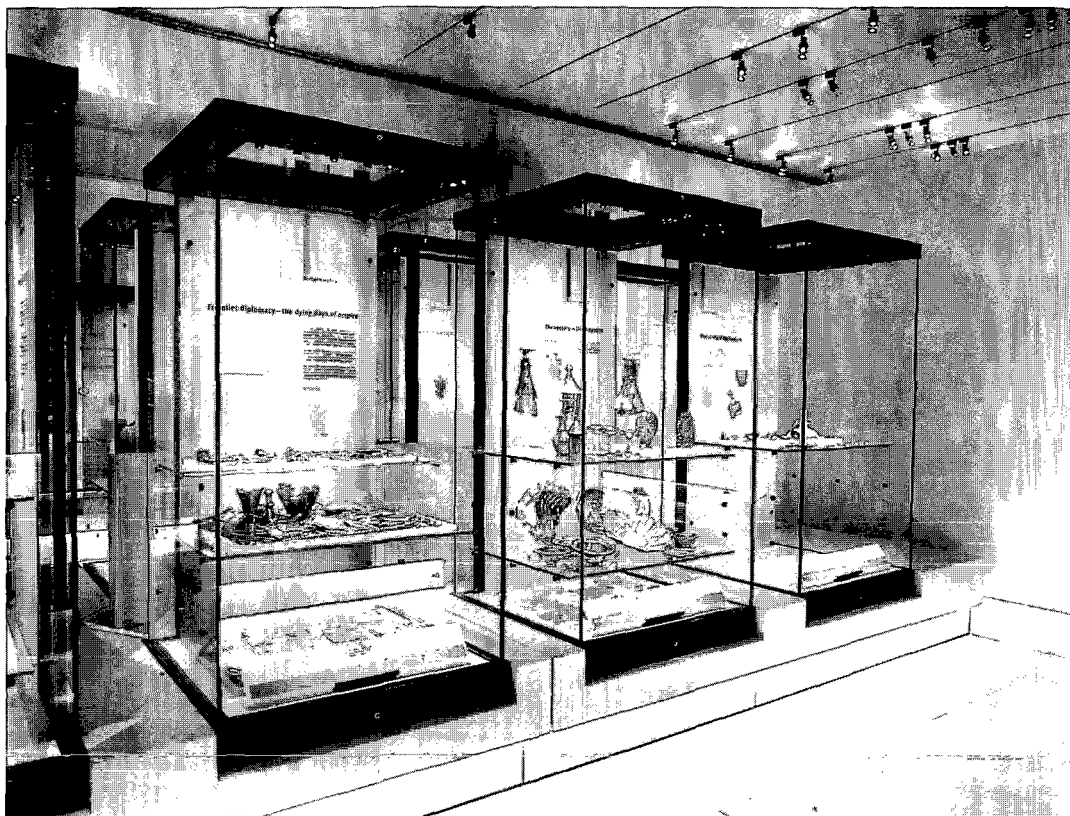
In this context it should be remembered that the original brief would have denied the Museum of Scotland its own entrance. Access was to be via the existing Chambers Street entrance of the Royal Museum. There are, of course, two very different ways of viewing this proposal which situate themselves in entirely different landscapes. The first claims that the intention is to emphasize Scotland's place in and of the world, whereas the second sees the intention as placing Scotland's history in an inconvenient annexe on the periphery. The political implications of the latter view taking hold, even in a Scotland at that time controlled by a Conservative Party determined to maintain the Union unchanged, do not need further emphasis.

The building, thus, was created against a developing brief. That which was sent forward at the time of the competition had been created with an 'elastic walls' mentality. Most public institutions, offered a new building, begin by trying to solve as many of their accommodation problems as possible. Initial briefs are, therefore, statements of the 'world-as-wished-for' not the 'world-as-is'. As the proposals are wrestled into a form that is realizable what can and cannot be changed also emerges.

In the Museum of Scotland the overall chronological structure and its mapping against the building remained unaltered, but proposed study galleries were abandoned as the space requirements of realizing our main exhibition intentions became clearer. The last vestiges of the study gallery approach are the silver and pottery galleries on Level 5 in Industry and Empire (illus 2). That study galleries had formed part of the initial brief was an interesting demonstration of an attempt to gain simultaneous positions in several museological landscapes. In the second half of the 20th century major museums have moved from dense, and relatively unexplained, displays to exhibitions that sought to make the material very much more accessible to visitors who come with no prior expertise. Inevitably, this transformation had significantly reduced the amount of material on display and disadvantaged the small but influential group of visitors who used museum displays as three-dimensional reference collections. The proposed study galleries reflected this latter tradition, but more recent thinking suggests that use of such 'open storage' facilities is not sufficient to justify their creation as part of developments on expensive city-centre sites. Nevertheless, the abandonment of this display approach can be perceived as narrowing the range of exhibition styles. But with still over 10,000 objects on display the Museum of Scotland might be thought to deny only the specialist.

As we have noted, the basic structure of the displays in the Museum of Scotland is chronological. The earliest material is in the basement and the latest at the top of the building. There are four major divisions: *Beginnings*, *Early People*, *Scotland in History*, and the *Twentieth Century*. These divisions reflect the changing nature of the evidence available to us when presenting different parts of Scotland's past and the approaches to their presentation have acknowledged these differences.

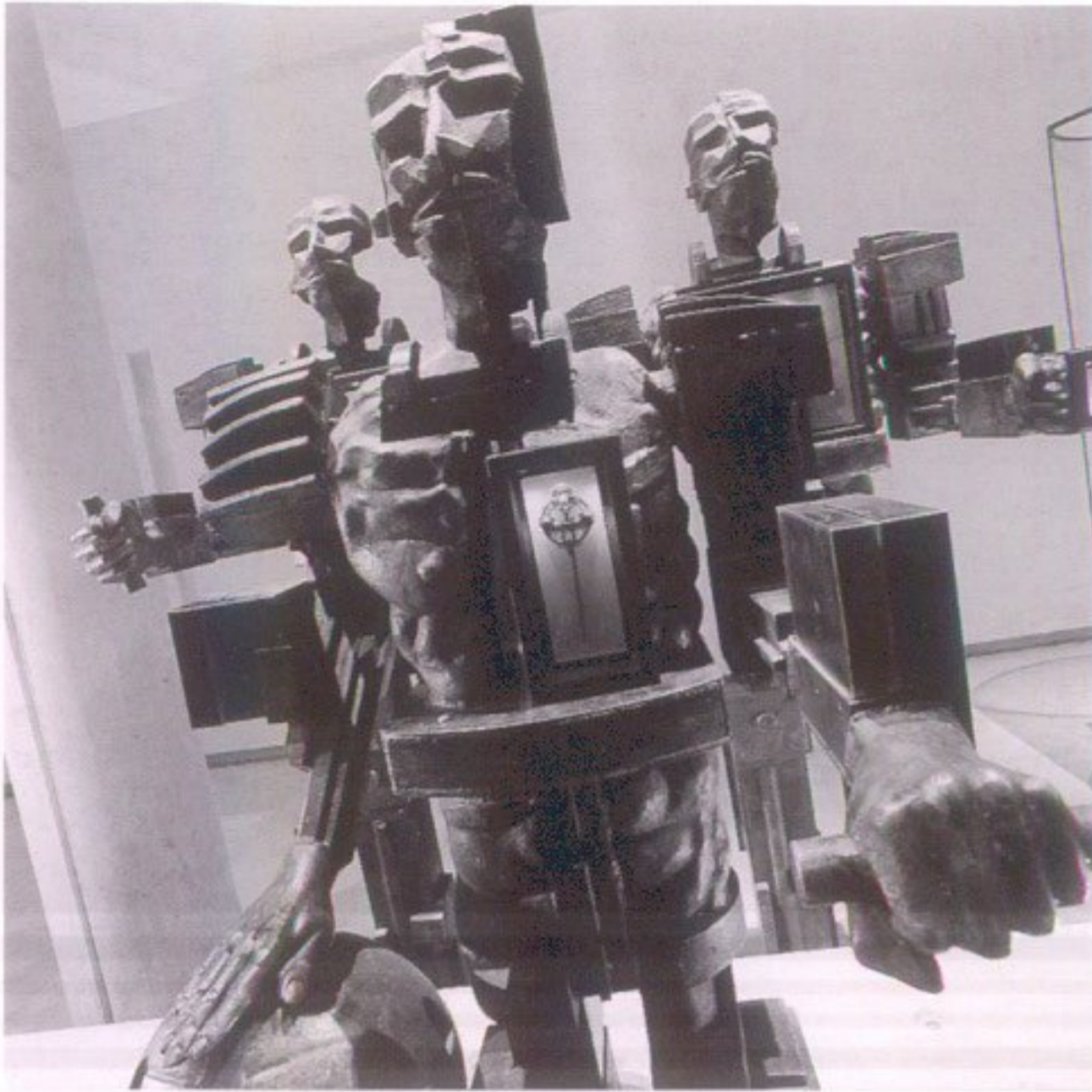
The key premise has been that objects can provide windows into the past available through no other sources. But because the Museum of Scotland is primarily a presentation of the surviving three-dimensional material it can never aspire to being a comprehensive summary of Scotland's history. This apparent weakness the museum has sought to turn into a benefit. It has quite deliberately constructed its presentations around the idea that much of the evidence is available elsewhere in Scotland — in, for example, other museums, the properties of Historic Scotland and the National Trust for Scotland, and the landscape generally. The hope is that the Museum of Scotland will create in visitors the wish to explore more.



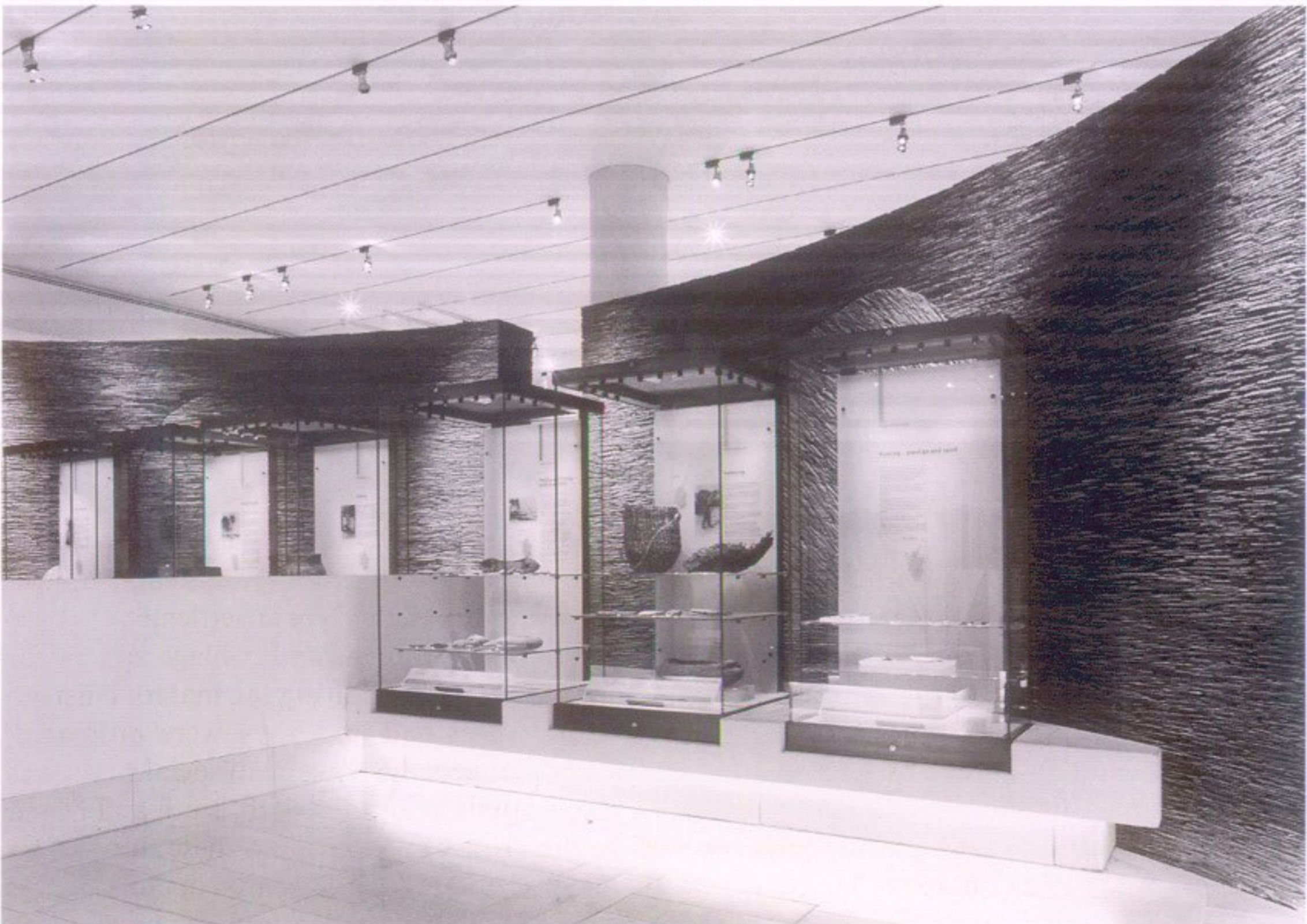
ILLUS 2 The Silver Gallery in Industry and Empire

Beginnings introduces us to Scotland as a physical entity created from diverse parts. It is Scotland before humans have arrived but full of plants and animals. The time-span is immense, more than 3000 million years. During this long period Scotland took on many forms. Among them, an arid desert, a sea floor under an iceberg-filled sea, an equatorial land of volcanoes and coral reefs, and a place of swampy coal forests. Eventually, following the last ice age, Scotland began to take on the form we know today. This familiar landscape, its flora and fauna, are nevertheless much changed by 10,000 years of human occupation.

Early People charts that human experience from the arrival of the first settlers some time in the early eighth millennium BC. It ends with the consolidation of the Norse settlements in the north and west, and the emergence of a single kingdom in which towns and coinage appear for the first time. It eschews the more usual chronological approach, structuring the material instead into four major themes. These examine key issues: resources and how they were processed; contact between groups and how goods and ideas were exchanged; the power and social structures that organized and controlled daily life; and, finally, the rituals associated with death and belief. The exhibition is introduced by a section emphasizing the role of people in all these things even though we cannot meaningfully identify the influence of the individual. This introductory area is created around 12 bronze figures by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi (with a generous funding contribution from the Society) (illus 3) and the sculptured stone from Hilton of Cadboll. The main displays have been constructed with a clearly defined route in mind, a journey through prehistory and



ILLUS 3 Bronze figures by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi in *Early People*



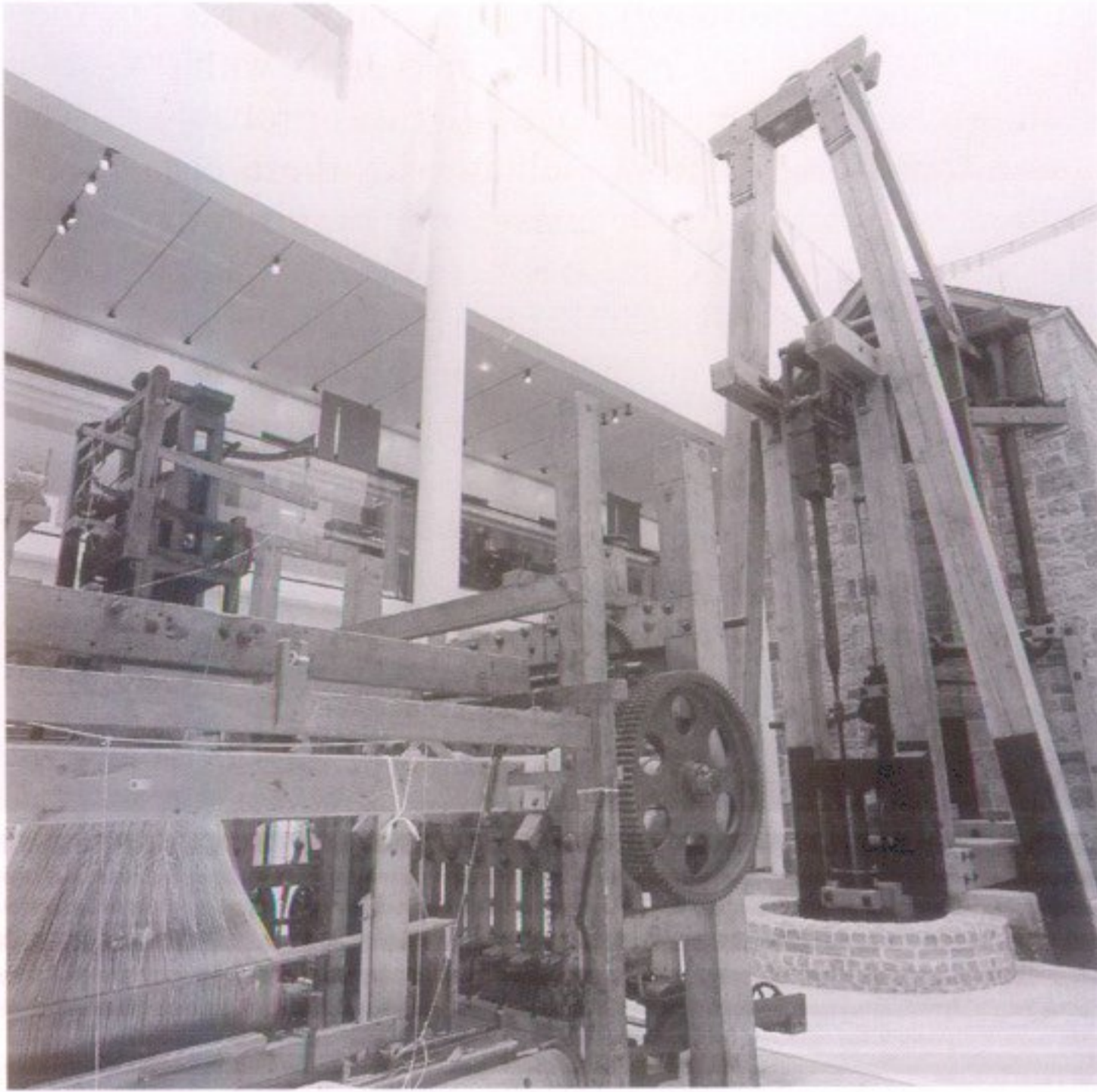
ILLUS 4 Curved wall of reused roofing slates by Andy Goldsworthy in *Early People*

early history. At various points on this journey visitors will encounter major works by Andy Goldsworthy (illus 4), reaffirming that there are still among us individuals with the same awareness, knowledge and appreciation of the natural environment that was probably second-nature to prehistoric people. But more than this, his works, along with those of Paolozzi, emphasize the importance of visitors using their imagination to engage with the distant past.

Scotland in History has three major areas. The first of these is Kingdom of the Scots which presents Scotland as an independent kingdom, c AD 1100–1707. This is an area of many themes and sub-themes: Monarchy and Power, the Reformation, the Union of the Crowns and the Covenanters. Here are objects associated with the earliest of the names dominating the popular versions of Scotland's history, among them Robert Bruce and Mary, Queen of Scots. And, of course, more controversially, the absence of anything in the national collections that might be linked to William Wallace has generated much passion since the museum opened. But among these pieces are many more reflecting the lives of unknown Scots in late medieval and Early Modern times. *Scotland Transformed* picks up these stories and issues in the period following the Union of 1707 — a time of dynastic strife between Stewart and Hanoverian. But more importantly, this was a time when Scotland changed from a predominantly rural society into a country of cities and towns with an economy underpinned by heavy industry, intellectually and materially rich, but with wealth realized at considerable social cost. There is a spectacular recreation of an original atmospheric engine from Kilmarnock in its pumping house in this gallery (illus 5). It symbolizes the ambitions and successes of the time but vividly reminds us of the conditions many suffered to deliver those achievements. The final section, *Industry and Empire*, looks at the influential roles Scotland and Scots played in the world in the two centuries before the First World War: Scotland as the workshop of the world; a nation contributing many of its citizens to life beyond its borders — as colonial administrators or soldiers, missionaries, engineers and emigrants. This is the period when many of the symbols and activities that we now conceive of as characterizing Scotland began to take on their modern meanings.

At the top of the building is the last section of the displays, the *Twentieth Century*. All of our visitors in the immediate future will have some direct experience of this century. The number of object types produced during it is huge. The available historical record in many media is immense. For all these reasons the museum has adopted a different approach in this gallery. Instead of leaving the selection entirely to curators the museum has asked Scots, famous and not so famous, to tell it what objects symbolize the 20th century for them and why. About 350 objects, selected in this way, are on display and visitors can add their own views and choices to a specially constructed database.

Many of the objects in the Museum of Scotland are making a first appearance on the public stage. Many more appear to be doing so because they can be displayed properly for the first time. But they have not been placed to act as highlights in a seamless landscape that is Scotland's past. The chronological structure appears to provide a shorthand description of such a panorama but the impression is illusory. True, some themes occur in more than one chronological area, but there are no effective armatures to link them. Instead, the need to harmonize with the immediate landscapes accommodating the surrounding themes overwhelms the connections with more distant parts of the building. The presentations do not try to mask the change through time in the nature of the evidential base for Scotland's past. Indeed, quite the opposite occurs. The display styles mark off quite clearly the museum's perception of differences in the quality and character of the evidence available for particular periods. It creates a series of designed landscapes which reflect and emphasize a less obvious set of intellectual landscapes. Characterizing the many



ILLUS 5 Newcomen engine and its house in Scotland Transformed



ILLUS 6 Part of the large diorama in *Beginnings*

nuances contained in this situation would require contributions from period specialists, but the main outlines can be drawn relatively easily.

Beginnings is about recreations (using the word in the usual sense and ignoring the difficult issue of whether it is really possible to talk about recreating an unknown original). It describes past landscapes and their flora and fauna. But much of the key evidence resides still in the rocks and sediments scattered across Scotland and the forms in which they are found. This then is evocation through sample, model, illustration and diorama (illus 6); basic principles are illustrated using techniques borrowed from science centres. There is a strong chronological route through the displays even though the immense time periods covered means that all that can be presented are snapshots of particular points in a continuum of billions of years. Here, the imagery is the dominant element, not the presented evidence. Some of the techniques, particularly the models and diorama, are directly linked to long-established display practices in museums.

Early People originates from an entirely different view of its evidence. It proceeds from the premise that portable material culture is the key element in our knowledge of the prehistoric and early historic past. Effectively, it regards structures in Scotland's geographical landscapes as sites where the continuum of existence was enacted, though our understanding of the elements constituting that existence is largely derived from portable material culture. Sites are a key backdrop against which the events of daily life were played out, but there is no attempt to bring those sites into the museum. They have to be experienced in their own landscapes and not through cropped versions decorating a building in central Edinburgh.

Instead the displays seek to give primacy to the objects in a thematic treatment which, while not eschewing chronology entirely, seeks to place it in the background (illus 7). Each case uses the same visual language to present a single main message. The back panel indicates the theme and provides an abbreviated message through a title and a more extended discussion referring to particular objects in a piece of continuous text. A map shows where each object was found and at the same time emphasizes the geographical extent of our concerns. It is a constant reaffirmation that a key landscape for the exhibitions is all of Scotland, not a part of it. At the foot of the case each object and its find-spot is identified and its estimated date indicated on a time-line.

There is for the creators of this exhibition a clear route through it, although early experience with our visitors suggests that its clarity is much less obvious to them. Nevertheless, the existence of a route through these distant historical landscapes, scarcely experienced by most in formal education, is important in enhancing opportunities for understanding. Unfamiliarity with the distant past is an issue shared with *Beginnings*. But the presence rather than absence of human groups in the landscapes, and the use of time-scales structured in thousands not millions of years, makes this seem a very different world. Although the individual is not recognizable in any meaningful way, the objects do represent individuals having aspirations and hopes with which we can associate. This in itself ensures easier accessibility than can be expected for a depiction of past natural worlds.

As one moves up the building the landscape becomes apparently more familiar. *Scotland in History* talks in terms of named individuals and groups. It does this even though in the basement below its current archaeological approaches have rejected the culture-historical mapping of a recognizable equivalence between ethnic group and material culture assemblages. The visitor is now in an environment where the stories have all been told, and the landscapes painted, elsewhere. Here is history created from texts and translated by the museum environment into a three-dimensional panorama. Moreover, it is a panorama with sufficiently familiar names — Robert Bruce; Mary, Queen of Scots; Bonnie Prince Charlie — to make one feel comfortable wandering in it.



ILLUS 7 Cases containing the Traprain Treasure in *Early People*



ILLUS 8 Scotland and the Renaissance in Kingdom of the Scots

And wandering is what one has to do. No longer is there even a notional sense of route (illus 8). *Scotland in History* contains many themes structured within two major chronological divisions but it provides little guidance, other than through the architectural arrangement of the floors, to the order in which they should, or even might, be viewed. This more recent past is apparently so complex that it can be ordered but not ranked. Not that this need be construed as a negative feature, for the sense of discovery and serendipitous associations it can provide may become a powerful element in the learning process.

As if mirroring this rather particularist approach to the past the individual displays lay greater emphasis on descriptions of the individual objects rather than their contribution to the general messages (illus 9). This is a long-established display approach in which the overall topic provides only a loose framework for the chosen objects. As such it represents the landscape of greatest familiarity in look and feel for those accustomed to historical presentations in major museums.

The *Twentieth Century* displays provide a sharp contrast, not least in the style of display which reflects temporary exhibitions and trade show approaches (illus 10). Moreover, the labelling describes the reasons why people chose the objects and only incidentally and inconsistently provides information about the objects. This is a landscape where the objects derive meaning principally from their situation in personally constructed environments. The social dimension is not absent but is here mediated through the individual, the very opposite of what can be attempted in *Early People*.

Perhaps it is the absence of the expected approach that has caused some critics to dislike it. Certainly, asking people to select a single object to represent the period poses fundamental questions about material culture's relationships to our understanding of the past. But the unwillingness of some to acknowledge that these are important issues which reflect on all of the Museum of Scotland's many landscapes is symptomatic of the glib assumptions underlying so many reviews of museum exhibitions.

Finally, the visitor emerges on to the roof of the building. In one sense, this is to rejoin the physical landscape of everyday Edinburgh existence, leaving behind the constructed and artificial environments of museum curators and designers. But it is not that straightforward. The view from the roof of the Museum of Scotland is not the same as that one can get from other viewpoints. Nor, more importantly, can it be easily viewed without reference to the Museum's contents. In one direction lies Arthur's Seat (illus 11)—indicative of Scotland as a world of volcanoes but equally key to Hutton's pioneering geological studies, a place covered with traces of prehistoric and historic monuments, a place where votive hoards of Bronze Age bronzes were deposited and a Roman intaglio ring made in a Mediterranean workshop was found. And in the opposite direction lies the Castle, with all its associations with Scotland's historic past, and Greyfriars Kirk and its churchyard where the National Covenant was signed. These evocations have been hinted at by the more restricted views to the external world available within the museum at particular points.

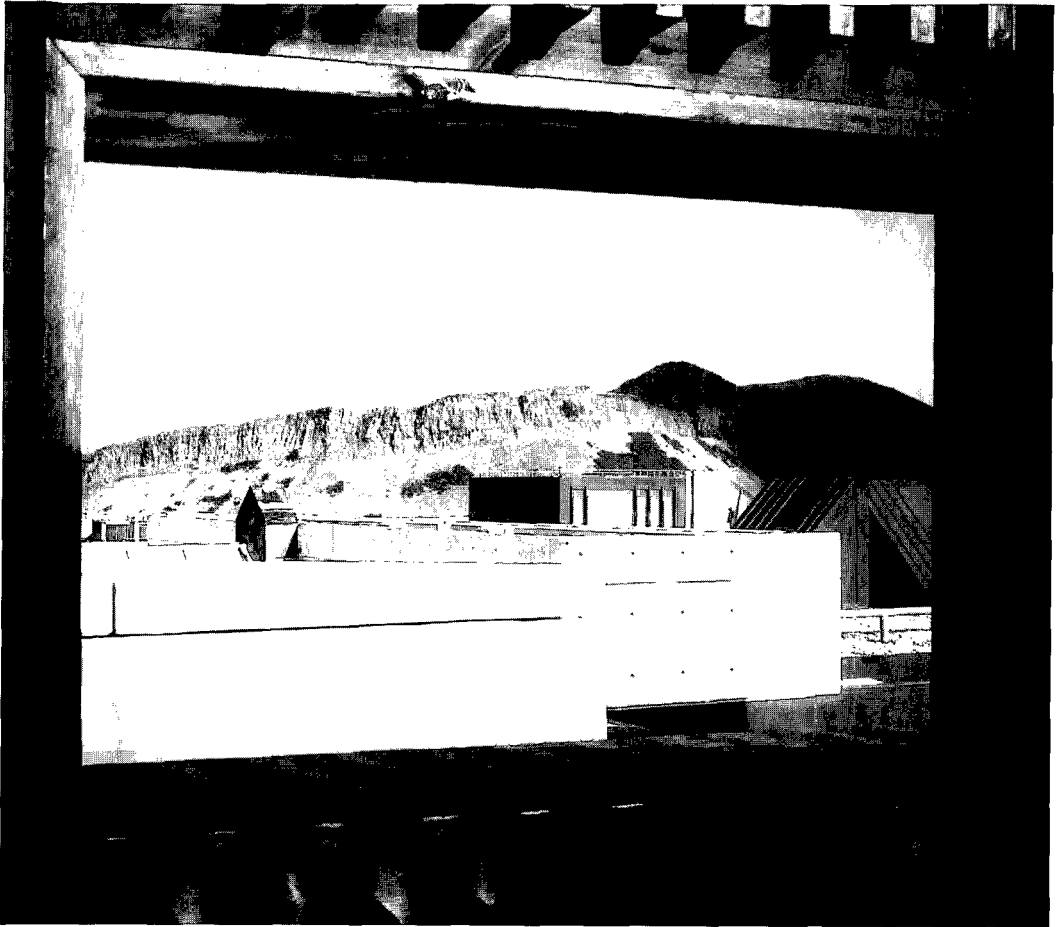
These are, then, the landscapes evoked and created by the Museum of Scotland. Some are only hinted at here, none is more than outlined. They are physical, cultural and intellectual, and the permutations created from them influence one's particular sense of Scotland's past. Some will find their preconceptions reinforced, some will find them challenged. The museum is inevitably a commentary on questions of Scottish identity but equally it cannot now avoid being influential in the continuing development of these questions. Perhaps longer in its realization than anybody would have wished, the Society can take pride in the fact that without its continued commitment



ILLUS 9 Trade and Industry displays in Scotland Transformed



ILLUS 10 Twentieth Century displays



ILLUS 11 View of Arthur's Seat from the roof of the Museum of Scotland

to building the national collections over more than two centuries, the Museum of Scotland would now be a greatly impoverished set of landscapes.

NOTE

1 Despite the writer's role as Head of Exhibitions in the Museum of Scotland Project, the views expressed in this article are personal opinions and should not be interpreted as necessarily reflecting the positions or policies of the National Museums of Scotland.

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