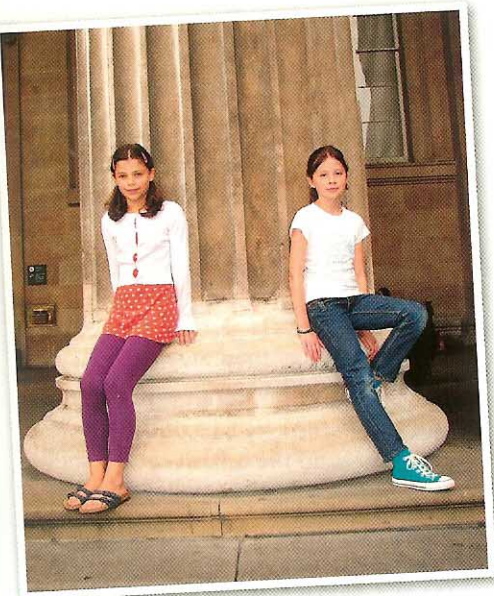


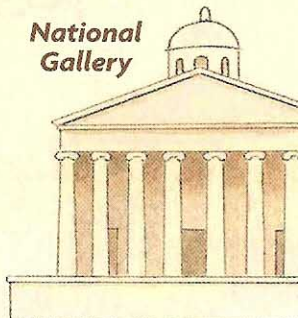
Let London inspire

JEREMY MUSSON takes daughter Miranda (10) and friend Rosie (11) on a treasure hunt around London's great galleries



An Egyptian mummy reposes at the British Museum

National Gallery



Piero della Francesca's serene Baptism of Christ in the National Gallery

LONG ago, a schoolmaster of mine advised going to see one painting at the National Gallery in London every time you go past. I thought it might be worth extending that idea to my own children, and so devised a half-day dash to grab a handful of the more quirky highlights of our excellent free museums.

We start with that gem of the smaller museum, the Sir John Soane's Museum on Lincoln's Inn Fields, the home and private museum of the great late Georgian architect, who left it to the nation. It's an Aladdin's cave of mirrors and objects, but still recognisably once a home for all that.

We go straight to the room full of Soane's Hogarths, including *The Rake's Progress*. Plenty to chuckle at here, but then (as I've visited a few times before), I ask the room warden if he would show the next layer. There are so many pictures that Soane had them hanging on panels, and they open up to reveal a wall full of paintings, including

views of the house itself painted in Soane's lifetime, which show how little has changed.

Next, I ask if the panels can be opened again, and a whole secret room is revealed down below. This moment was the star of the day, with both Miranda and Rosie open-mouthed and 'wowing' all over the place. When we go down the stairs to see the alabaster sarcophagus of Seti, we spot a skeleton that, according to one of the wardens, who are all exceptionally well-informed, was used by Flaxman's drawing pupils. Modern analysis has shown it to be a skeleton made up of the bones of a man and a woman, which the girls thought a riveting piece of information, much repeated later to other members of the family. Miranda thought it a splendidly 'secretive place'.

Next stop is a quick walk up Bloomsbury Way and a right turn up Museum Street to the great British Museum itself, built in Greek temple form, at about the same time as the Soane Museum was coming together, and

drawing on the private collection of Sir Hans Sloane, the physician after whom Sloane Square is named (just think, it could have been called the Sloane Museum). The entrance portico are a natural hide-and-seek place.

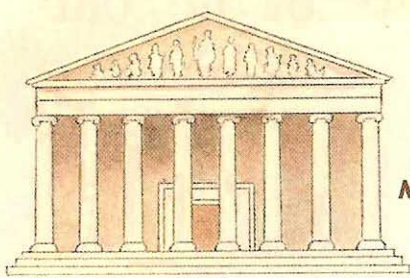
The origin of museums and collecting is explored in Room 1, the Enlightenment Gallery—one of my favourite rooms in London—but, for our treasure hunt, we go to the Assyrian Gallery, where I thought the girls would like the giant fist of a king, part of a detached arm in polished red granite. I get them to compare it to the size of their own fists, and then to look up and see the detached head that once went with it.

Just behind this is the Rosetta Stone, a proclamation in Greek and hieroglyphics that allowed the translation of Egyptian monuments. Nearby are the Parthenon marbles, and we admire the sculpted horses.

We take a short ride in a taxi to St Martin's Lane, where we fortify ourselves with tea at Browns' before a wander down Cecil



Getting points on the 'wow-o-meter'? The labyrinthine Soane Museum is full of surprises

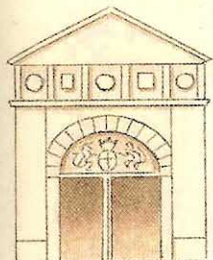


British Museum

The Sir John Soane's Museum



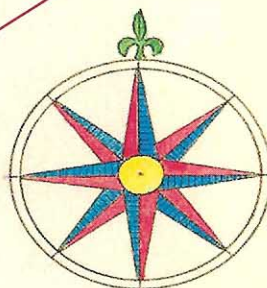
The magical expanding room at the Sir John Soane's Museum



National Portrait Gallery



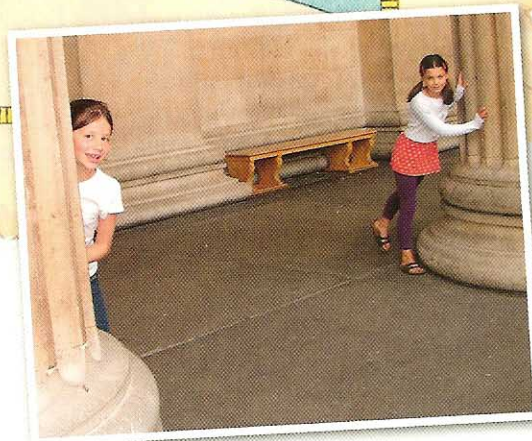
Henry VIII in the Tudor Gallery at the National Portrait Gallery



RIVER THAMES



(Left) Peep-show box by Hoogstraten in the National Gallery. (Right) British Museum hide and seek



From anamorphic skulls to Assyrian kings, London is full of astonishing—and free—treasures

Court, still full of old bookshops and theatrical souvenirs—the kind of place where museum collections must have started.

After that, we walk down Charing Cross Road to the National Portrait Gallery. Here, we go straight to the Tudor Gallery, to look at the anamorphic painting of Edward VI aged nine, just before he became king. His features are horribly exaggerated, and it's only when you go to the side, to the thoughtfully provided peephole, that you can appreciate the trick—from this angle, the face is that of a normal boy. This got points on the 'wow-o-meter' from Rosie and Miranda.

A run through the room of Victorian arts gives the girls a chance to spot authors of great children's stories—Robert Louis Stevenson, author of *Treasure Island*; Oscar Wilde, *The Selfish Giant*; and Rudyard Kipling, *The Just-So Stories*—then we pop down to the Contemporary Gallery, where actors are

depicted, including Sir Ian McKellen, or Gandalf, as the children think of him.

Next, we mount the imposing steps to the National Gallery. Here, I have one thought in mind, the mid-17th-century peep-show box by Samuel van Hoogstraten, which shows a series of views of a Dutch interior that seemed out of kilter, but once you find the hole and look through, the perspectives all come into line. ('I love it', says one of our party—phew!)

This also inspires us to look at the other Dutch interior paintings and the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *Ambassadors*, then to walk the central gallery axis along to the Sainsbury wing, towards the keyhole-like perspective that leads the way to Piero della Francesca's serene *Baptism of Christ*.

Finally, I walk the girls down Pall Mall and catch a black cab, asking to be taken to 'Harrods via a view of Buckingham Palace'.

The taxi driver gallantly points all the royal residences along the way—Clarence House ('Charlie's Place'), St James' and the palace, plus No 1 London, the home of the Duke of Wellington. Finally, we celebrate with a huge knickerbocker glory in the Harrod's ice-cream parlour, run for the past 10 years by Morelli's, founded in 1905. A fitting reward for trainee connoisseurs under 12, I feel. 🐣

The Sir John Soane's Museum (020-7440 4263; www.soane.org)

The British Museum (020-7323 8299; www.britishmuseum.org)

National Portrait Gallery (020-7312 2463; www.npg.org.uk)

National Gallery (020-7747 2885; www.nationalgallery.org.uk)

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