# Peter the cult

The modern passion for Princess Diana memorabilia and even Queen Mother tea-cosies may strike us as a peculiar phenomenon of our age. But there is, it seems, nothing new about the popular appetite for such royal knick-knacks, according to the evidence of the National Maritime Museum's current exhibition recalling the visit to London 300 years ago of Tsar Peter the Great.

In the 18th century, the bold figure of Peter the Great was immortalized on snuff boxes and wall plaques throughout English households. The lumbering and convivial 6'7" party-boy had made his way to England in1699 and won over our hearts with his larger-than-life personality.

'It was so unusual to have a Russian ruler come to England. He was astonishing to see – an alcoholic who got drunk and wrecked things. No wonder his image became so popular,' says Sharon Flynn, curator of the Peter the Great exhibition which runs at The National Maritime Museum until 27 September.

The exhibition features two examples of Peter memorabilia – a tortoise-shell plaque with Peter the Great depicted on his horse in relief and an enamel lid, probably for a snuff box, decorated with a painting of the tsar's torso.

'These would have been sort of mass-produced items, the kind of thing common in urban upper middle class homes,' says David Gaimster, curator of medieval and later antiquities at the British Museum, which owns the items.

Peter the Great died in 1725, but he didn't become a cult hero in Britain for almost 20 years afterwards, when the industrial revolution made mass-production of memorabilia possible.

**In vogue: Peter strikes a pose**

In addition to collecting Peter the Great objects, the royal family was also very popular as was Frederick the Great, who, Gaimster says, people remembered as an English ally in the Seven Years War.

'They would have collected them for the same reasons people now collect Diana merchandise, as commemorative items,' says Gaimster, 'they were pop culture icons back then.' (Jennifer Lisle)

# Mummies in the bank

An Egyptologist at Manchester University Museum has set up the world's first mummy tissue bank, with the aim, among other things, of using the flesh of Egyptian mummies to help combat present-day diseases.

Three-thousand-year-old mummy flesh is rather dry and brittle. 'But you just rehydrate it with some water, and whatever disease they had is still caught in that tissue,' explains Dr Rosalie David, head Egyptologist at the Manchester University Museum.

Some ancient diseases like bilharzia still threaten contemporary populations, and David has put out a call to 8,000 museums requesting samples for its new mummy flesh bank. Bilharzia, which felled many an ancient Egyptian, still occurs in 79 countries worldwide and can be fatal if left untreated.

Along with the Manchester Museum's American partner, Medical Services Corporation, of Arlington, Virginia, David hopes to study the pattern of this disease's development and to pioneer techniques for studying general disease evolution.

'We only need a little bit to work with; we're asking for samples of one to two grams,' says David, who has approached museums all over the world. Although some institutions only have body parts like hands and feet in their collections, many have fully intact internal organs, since these were often buried and preserved separately from the body.

The samples, which will probably be from 800 to 4,000 years old, are extracted through specialised endoscopic equipment developed by David herself. In addition to being used for studying disease, the bank will be a resource for analysing ancient DNA and genetic coding. (Jennifer Lisle)

**A pound of mummy flesh: Dr Rosalie David carefully takes a sample**

## News in brief

### Clean as a whistle

The Natural History Museum has rejected allegations that it harbours the bones of Aborigines murdered to fill the orders of 19th Century scientists. In the last century, most skulls acquired by museums to study the 'purity' of races were bought from grave-robbers and hospitals.

But experts claim that some were victims of contract killings. The Natural History Museum, however, has denied these killings as a myth.

To clear possible confusion, it has stated that its bones were inherited from the Royal College of Surgeons after World War II.

### New blood

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the oldest in the country, has appointed Dr Christopher Brown, chief curator of the National Gallery, to become its new director as of June. Originally, George Goldner of New York's Metropolitan Museum, had been appointed to take over the post last October but decided last June to decline.

During his 27-year tenure at The National Gallery, Brown curated several important exhibitions and published widely on Dutch and Flemish painting of the 16th and 17th centuries. Author of *The Drawings of Van Dyck,* (1991), and *Rubens's Landscapes* (1996), Brown also revised the National Gallery's catalogue of *The Dutch School 1600-1900* (1991).

'I look forward to shaping the future of this country's oldest museum,' said Brown.

### The David at night

Italian museums are experimenting with extending their viewing hours from 9am until 10 pm six days a week. The move means that they will be accessible for an average of four hours more a day than they were previously.

The move is part of a three-year experiment which started in April and involves 16 flagship museums, including the Uffizi in Florence. Some of the others who are not such night owls will be adopting the same hours only on Sundays. (Melisa Douek)