

Museum Folkwang

Neil MacGregor

Neil MacGregor headed the National Gallery in London from 1987 to 2002 and has been the director of the British Museum since 2002.

Neil MacGregor was born in Glasgow in 1946. He studied modern languages at New College in Oxford, of which he is now honorary fellow, philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris (he took part in the May 1968 demonstrations there) and law at the University of Edinburgh. After passing the bar exam in 1972, MacGregor decided to do a degree in art history at the Courtauld Institute, whose director, Anthony Blunt, later described him as the most brilliant student he had ever taught.

From 1975 to 1981 MacGregor taught history of art and architecture at the University of Reading, after which he became editor of the *Burlington Magazine*. In 1987 he was named director of the National Gallery in London. Scientific work, dealing with the collection, internationally successful exhibitions – in all areas of the museum, MacGregor set new standards with his extraordinary ability to capture the sense and meaning of a work, its cultural and political context. In two BBC television series, *Making Masterpieces* (1997), a documentary looking behind the scenes at the National Gallery, and *Seeing Salvation* (2000), on the depiction of Jesus Christ in Western art, he succeeded in familiarizing a larger public with complex themes. MacGregor is, in the words of his successor as head of the National Gallery, Charles Saumarez-Smith, one of the cleverest, shrewdest and intellectually most open-minded colleagues, with the rare ability of being able to communicate with people of all backgrounds.

MacGregor was named director of the British Museum in 2002 – in a time when the British Museum found itself in a difficult situation. He quickly managed to put the museum back on the path to success. Today, with more than 6 million visitors per year, the British Museum is one of the most successful museums in the world. In doing so, he has always defended free entrance as indispensable for a public museum.

In his defending and further developing the close link between research and museum work, also in international cooperation, MacGregor has rendered special service to the development of a global society. He extended cultural ties with countries such as China, Iraq and Iran. In 2003, MacGregor sent curators to Baghdad to assist the Iraqi museums in overcoming the damage and loss from war. In 2008 Neil MacGregor was named chairman of the "World Collections Programme", a joint effort of the most important London museums (Natural History Museum, Tate, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Victoria & Albert Museum, British Library) which seeks to collaborate with institutions in Black Africa as well as in the Middle and Far East and which also supports, among other things, the International Curator Training Program which brings together young curators from around the world.

A number of important exhibitions have taken place under Neil MacGregor direction, most recently in the British Museum. *The Museum of the Mind: Art and Memory in World Cultures* (2003), a memory on the relation between memory and cultural identity in diverse cultures; *First Emperor* (2007), an exhibition on Qin Shi Huang, which showed a part of his terracotta army and raised the question state power and civil liberties. These were followed by exhibitions on *Hadrian* (2008), on Iran under *Shah 'Abbas* (2009) and on the Aztecs under *Moctezuma* (2009), which dealt with the development of national identity. The British newspaper *The Times* named Neil MacGregor "Brit of the Year" in 2009.

For the BBC he has made the documentaries *Our Top Ten Treasures* (2003) and *The Museum* (2007). Currently he is presenting a series entitled *A History of the World in 100 Objects* in BBC Radio 4 and the BBC World Service, which presents to a vast public the works in the British Museum from different

cultures and eras with exemplary clarity and vividness, thereby accessing question of art, history, creativity, memory and knowledge.

Short Biography

June 1946
Born in Glasgow

1975-1981
Lecturer of Art History at the University of Reading

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Editor of *Burlington Magazine*

1986-2002
Director of the National Gallery, London

Since 2002
Director of the British Museum, London