

# BRITISH MUSEUM

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## Basic Information

Situated in Great Russell Street, London, the British Museum (<http://www.britishmuseum.org/>) was created by an Act of Parliament in 1753 and opened to the public in 1759. Governed by a board of 25 trustees in accordance with the British Museum Act of 1963 and the Museums and Galleries Act of 1992, the museum is a non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The museum's stated purpose is "to hold for the benefit and education of humanity a collection representative of world cultures and to ensure that the collection is housed in safety, conserved, curated, researched and exhibited" (*British Museum* n.d.).

The British Museum originated with the collection belonging to physician and naturalist, Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), which consisted of natural history specimens, ethnographic material, antiquities, jewellery, coins, medals, prints, and orientalia. This was combined with a large library of manuscripts assembled by Sir Robert Cotton, and the Harleian Library, the manuscript collection of the earls of Oxford. Expanded in 1757 with the addition of King George II's donation of the old Royal Library, the museum thus originally mainly consisted of natural history specimens, books and manuscripts. In 1772 the museum acquired its first collection of notable antiquities with the Greek vases belonging to Sir William Hamilton. In 1807 it created a specific Department of Antiquities which, in 1860, was divided into three: Greek and Roman Antiquities; Oriental Antiquities; and Coins and Medals. In the early 1880s the museum divested itself of its Natural History collection, consequently making space for its expanding collection of antiquities. In 1997 the books and manuscripts making up the National Library were moved from the British Museum to their new home at St Pancras, and the museum's circular Reading Room subsequently incorporated, in 2000, into the re-designed Great Court (Wilson 2002).

Today the Museum is made up of ten departments, primarily consisting of antiquities, which together contain 8 million objects: The Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan houses material from the Nile Valley, spanning the Predynastic Neolithic ca.10,000 BCE to the Coptic Christian period in the 12th century CE. It includes such famous objects as the colossal bust of Ramesses II, the Gayer Anderson cat, the Amarna Tablets and the Rosetta Stone; The Department of Greece and Rome houses Mediterranean antiquities dating from the Bronze Age to the 4th century CE and includes bronze sculpture, Greek vases, elements from the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus and the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, and the controversial Elgin Marbles; The Department of the Middle East focuses upon the material culture of Mesopotamia, Iran, the Levant, Anatolia, Arabia, Central Asia and the Caucasus from the Neolithic period to the present. It contains objects such as Sumerian material from the royal cemetery at Ur, the Old

Babylonian 'Queen of the Night' plaque, the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, and the lion-hunt reliefs from the Assyrian palaces at Nimrud and Nineveh.

The museum's Department of Prehistory and Europe focuses on the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods, the Bronze and Iron Ages, Roman Britain, and the Medieval and Renaissance periods up to the present. It houses such objects as the 7th century CE Sutton Hoo Anglo-Saxon ship burial and the Lewis Chessmen. It works in conjunction with the Department of Portable Antiquities and Treasure which co-ordinates the Portable Antiquities Scheme through which archaeological objects found by members of the public are recorded, and which administers the Treasure Act 1996 on behalf of the UK Government; The Department of Asia contains material spanning the Neolithic ca.4000 BCE to the present, and includes the Buddhist limestone reliefs from Amaravati; The Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas combines ethnographic, historical, archaeological and contemporary material, and includes the controversial Benin bronzes; The Department of Coins and Medals is concerned with the history of coinage from the 7th cent BCE to the present; The Department of Prints and Drawings contains the National Collection of Western prints and drawings, dating from the fifteenth century to the present day; and the Department of Conservation and Scientific Research works with the other departments to conserve and study the collection.

## Major Impact

The British Museum can claim to be the first national museum in the world. Its collection is amongst the largest and most extensive in existence and formed the basis of what later became the Natural History Museum which opened in 1881, and the British Library created in 1973. The museum has a long association with archaeological excavation, beginning with Charles Fellows's expedition to Xanthos in Asia Minor in 1840. It supported Austen Henry Layard's excavations in Assyria which resulted in the discovery of Ashurbanipal's great library of cuneiform tablets. The museum was also involved in the creation of the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1882. The museum maintains an active role in many national and international archaeological fieldwork projects. It encourages its staff to participate in excavation and fieldwork, and is one of the chief British sources of funds for research excavation. The museum is also inextricably involved in the debate about the Return of Cultural Property, with the Elgin Marbles, the Rosetta Stone and the Benin Bronzes the most prominent amongst the contested objects in its collection (Wilson 2002).

The museum is the UK's most popular visitor attraction (FitzGerald 2012) and seeks to actively engage with the public. Museum facilities such as departmental study rooms and libraries are accessible to members of the public undertaking their own research. The museum collection is available online with a searchable database containing 2,036,885 objects, 703,883 of which are accompanied by photographs. The British Museum Press publishes books relating to exhibitions and aspects of the collection, and the museum also has three online journals, *The British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan*, *British Museum Technical Research Bulletin*, and *Bronze Age Review*. The museum website also includes a blog containing regular posts by members of staff on recent news, exhibitions, acquisitions, aspects of the collection and archaeological excavations. The museum works in partnership with universities to offer higher education courses, actively encourages visits by school groups, and holds family-focussed events.

## Cross-References

Archaeology Museums and the Public

Conservation in Museums

Cultural Property Repatriation and Restitution: Introduction

Encyclopaedic Museum

Ethics of Collecting Cultural Heritage

Heritage Museums and the Public

Museum Exhibitions and Displays, and Presentation/Interpretation of Sites/Monuments to the Public

Museums in the Material Discourse of History

Parthenon (Elgin) Marbles, Case Study of

Repatriation

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## Further Reading

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