

British Museum

Policy on Acquisitions

This Policy outlines the principles the Museum takes into account when acquiring objects for its collection¹.

1. Purpose of Acquisitions

The British Museum is a universal museum holding an encyclopaedic collection of material from across the world and all periods of human culture and history. For the benefit of its audience now and in the future, the Museum is committed to sustaining and improving its collection.

The Museum makes acquisitions in order to:

- 1.1 Maintain and improve its cultural and historical record of the world's cultures and civilizations, including new, recently discovered, unexplored or poorly understood fields of human history and experience;
- 1.2 Generate public interest in the past and present and illustrate the ways in which art and material culture mirror and inform the present;
- 1.3 Create new audiences and inform, entertain and inspire the existing audience in new ways;
- 1.4 Promote better relations between people of differing cultures, nationalities, races and beliefs.

2. Acquisition Principles

- 2.1 The Museum will always seek to ensure compliance with the principles set out in *Combating Illicit Trade: Due Diligence Guidelines for Museums, Libraries and Archives on Collecting and Borrowing Cultural Material*. (DCMS 2005)
- 2.2 The Museum will not acquire objects unless they are legally available for acquisition. If the Museum is in doubt it will not proceed with the acquisition. Transferors and/or the Museum should complete a written record to demonstrate that due diligence has been exercised in respect of title and provenance.
- 2.3. The Museum will not accept whether as a gift or bequest, or on purchase, any object without obtaining the confirmation of the donor, executor or seller that s/he owns the object, and is able to transfer it free from encumbrances. The Museum will not acquire any object where it has reasonable cause to believe that the current holder is not

¹ This policy takes account of the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Cultural Property (14th November 1970); the Return of Cultural Objects Regulations 1994; the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003; the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, dated 3 March 1973; the Treasure Act 1996; the *Treasure Act 1996 Code of Practice (Revised) England and Wales*; the *Combating Illicit Trade: Due Diligence Guidelines for Museums, Libraries and Archives on Collecting and Borrowing Cultural Material*; the Code of Professional Ethics of the International Council of Museums (ICOM); the Code of Professional Ethics of the Museums Association (MA); and the Code of Practice on Archives for Museums in the United Kingdom

legitimately entitled to retain the object or that the object was stolen, illegally exported or illegally imported.

- 2.4. The Museum deplors the looting of antiquities with the ensuing damage to archaeological sites and loss of cultural context. The Museum does not acquire objects that are known to result from such looting.
- 2.5 The Museum will normally only acquire those archaeological and heritage objects that have documentation to show a legal history back to November 14th 1970 (the date of the UNESCO Convention) and this policy will apply to all objects of major importance. The Museum recognises, however, that in practice many minor items² are not accompanied by detailed documentary history or proof of origin and reserves the right for the Museum's curators to use their best judgement as to whether such objects should be recommended for acquisition.
- 2.6 There may be occasions when acquisition outside of the application of this policy is considered, as for example could occur if cultural or archaeological objects were otherwise under threat of destruction. The Museum may sometimes also act as a repository of last resort for antiquities, especially when it may reliably be inferred that the object(s) concerned originated within the United Kingdom, and where such payment as may be made to acquire the object(s) is not likely to encourage illicit excavation. Such circumstances would be exceptional and would be matters for discussion by the Board of Trustees³.
- 2.7 The Museum will pay due respect to the moral rights of other individuals, groups or organisations.
- 2.8 The Museum does not normally acquire objects and materials made of , or including in their composition, parts or derivatives of wild fauna or flora included in any appendix to the CITES convention, where that object or material has been traded in contravention of the Convention since 1973.
- 2.9 The Museum normally expects Treasure finds from England to be acquired by regional museums and, in general, will acquire Treasure finds either when those museums are unable to proceed with the acquisition or, in the case of finds of major significance, only with the support of the appropriate regional museum.
- 2.10 The Museum does not purchase objects for the collection unless full funding has first been secured and it is satisfied that the purchase price represents value for money.
- 2.11 Acquisitions are normally made only after the costs of acquisition, conservation, storage and display have been identified and fully funded. Objects in such poor condition that

² As defined in *Combating Illicit Trade: Due Diligence Guidelines for Museums, Libraries and Archives on Collecting and Borrowing Cultural Material*

³ An example of a circumstance in which this might happen would be if the Museum were invited to accept items seized by HM Customs and Revenue as a donation to the Collection

they cannot be stabilised by conservation treatments are not normally acquired.

2.12 Acquisitions to be vested in the collection will be given a collection registration number on transfer and will be entered on the collection database as soon as possible thereafter.

2.13 Gifts are not accepted subject to conditions which are unreasonable or unduly onerous.

2.14 The Museum will normally expect to receive from the transferor any records and contextual information about an object it acquires.

2.15 The Museum will normally seek to obtain from the transferor an assignment of subsisting intellectual property rights in an acquisition or the rights' holder's licence to reproduce the object for the Museum's general purposes .

2.16 No acquisition will be made in conflict with the Ethics Policy.

This Policy was approved by the Trustees of the British Museum on 24 April 2007 and will be reviewed no later than 2011.