The British Museum

Study Room Services

Object identification service

The British Museum provides an object identification service, through which we offer opinions on objects held by members of the public. Please note that we cannot give valuations.

Code of ethics

The British Museum is committed to supporting international efforts aimed at preventing damage to archaeological sites and the illicit trade in cultural objects. Many people are unaware of the extent and impact of this issue and do not recognise that the everyday trade in antiquities, including object perceived as “low-value”, is a contributing factor.

The Museum recognises ethical codes defined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the Museums Association. These codes are stricter than the legal framework that governs dealers and auction houses. As a result, we cannot give an opinion on ancient objects made and/or found outside the United Kingdom where the provenance is uncertain or may be contrary to national or international law.

“Good provenance” means being able to trace an object’s past movements back to at least November 1970 **and** determining that possession of the object does not contravene any local antiquities laws relating to its country of origin. When the Museum acquires or borrows objects it has to demonstrate that the object meets these requirements. The same criteria apply to object identifications.

For “important” objects, documentary evidence of good provenance is required. For “low-value” objects, a verbal or written statement may be sufficient.

ICOM’s Code of Ethics for Museums, para.5.1, states:
‘Where museums provide an identification service, they should not act in any way that could be regarded as benefiting from such activity [the illicit trade], directly or indirectly. The identification and authentication of objects that are believed or suspected to have been illegally or illicitly acquired, transferred, imported or exported, should not be made public until the appropriate authorities have been notified.’

The Museums Association’s Code of Ethics for Museums, para.5.16, states:
‘Decline to offer expertise on, or otherwise assist the current possessor of any item that may have been illicitly obtained, unless it is to assist law enforcement or to support other organizations in countering illicit activities.’

Bringing objects to the museum for identification

Objects may be brought for identification on Wednesday afternoons by appointment only. E-mail the relevant collections department with a description of the object and a clear photograph, and a member of staff will contact you via e-mail to book an appointment date when the relevant curator for the object you wish to have examined is available.

If you are bringing objects in to the Museum, please go straight to the Information Desk to collect a Visitor Object Pass. You will be asked to fill out your name and address and a brief description of the object. This will be stamped, at which point you can take your object to the relevant departmental Study Room.

The pass is for your own protection, as you may be challenged if carrying an object that might be the property of The British Museum. The pass must be returned to the Information Desk on leaving.

The museum will not take objects on deposit for the purposes of identification.