

The British Museum

British Museum Policy

Acquisitions of Objects for the Collection

This policy outlines the principles the Trustees of the British Museum expect to be followed when objects are acquired for their collection. The policy complies with the British Museum Act 1963, and other UK legislation, international law and standards as set out in Annex 1.

1. Purpose of Acquisitions

1.1 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 Trustees are committed to sustaining and improving the Museum's collection.

1.2 Acquisitions are made in order to:

- (i) maintain and improve the Museum's 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;
- (ii) generate public interest in the past and present;
- (iii) create new audiences and inform, entertain and inspire the existing audience in new ways; and
- (iv) generate public understanding of differing cultural perspectives.

2. The Collection

2.1 The Museum's Collection is held within eight curatorial departments:

- (i) Africa, Oceania and the Americas;
- (ii) Ancient Egypt and Sudan;
- (iii) Asia;
- (iv) Coins and Medals;
- (v) Greece and Rome;
- (vi) Middle East;
- (vii) Prehistory and Europe; and
- (viii) Prints and Drawings;

2.2 The Trustees expect:

- (i) priorities for acquisitions by these departments to be set out in an acquisitions strategy for the Museum, which takes account of the published collecting policies and strategies of other museums and other UK-based organisations existing for public benefit and collecting in fields or areas the same as or related to those of the Museum. The strategy should define areas of specialism, in order to avoid unnecessary duplication in national collections and wasteful application of resources; and
- (ii) the acquisitions strategy and decisions made pursuant to it to be subject to consultation with the above organisations in order to mitigate conflicts of collecting interest.

3. Acquisition Principles

3.1 Objects will only be acquired for the Museum's collection if:

- (i) they are legally available for acquisition and

- (ii) there is no reasonable cause to believe they were wrongfully taken from a lawful owner; looted from archaeological sites or museums; or wrongfully exported or imported.
- 3.2 Objects acquired for the Collection should have a documented legal history; which, where applicable, should extend back before November 14th 1970¹; however, objects without documented histories may be added to the collection, if paragraph 3.1(i) applies and:
 - (i) the objects were lawfully seized by HM Customs and Revenue;
 - (ii) the objects would otherwise be at risk of destruction;
 - (iii) the Museum acts as a repository of last resort (especially where it may reliably be inferred that the objects originated within the United Kingdom and any payments made to acquire to them could not reasonably be interpreted as condoning or encouraging illicit excavation); or
 - (iv) paragraph 3.1(ii) applies; and
 - a. the standards set by the DCMS guidelines *Combating Illicit Trade: Due Diligence Guidelines for Museums, Libraries and Archives on Collecting and Borrowing Cultural Material (2005)* are met by other means; or,
 - b. the objects are minor items², for which no, or only limited, documentary legal history exists.
- 3.3 Objects are not normally acquired that are 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 has been traded in contravention of the Convention since 1973.
- 3.4 Treasure finds from England should normally be acquired by regional museums; and, in general, Treasure finds will be acquired 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.
- 3.5 Objects will not be bought for the Collection unless full funding has first been secured and the purchase price represents value for money.
- 3.6 Objects are normally acquired only after the costs of acquisition, conservation, storage and display have been taken into consideration. Objects in very poor condition (or in such condition that they are inherently liable to deteriorate and cannot be reliably stabilised by conservation treatments) are not normally acquired.
- 3.7 Objects acquired 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.
- 3.8 Gifts into the Collection are not accepted subject to conditions which are unreasonable or unduly onerous, such as restrictions on the loan of an object or its display.
- 3.9 The transferor of an object acquired for the Collection will normally be expected to also supply all records and other contextual information about it.
- 3.10 The transferor of an object acquired for the Collection will normally be expected to also supply an assignment of subsisting intellectual property rights in it or the rights holder's licence to reproduce the object for the Museum's general purposes.
- 3.11 As the Museum holds and intends to acquire archives, including photographs, digital images and printed ephemera, it will be guided by the Code of Practice on Archives for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom (third edition, 2002).
- 3.12 Acquisitions outside this policy will only be made in very exceptional circumstances,

¹ The date of the UNESCO Convention

² As defined in *Combating Illicit Trade: Due Diligence Guidelines for Museums, Libraries and Archives on Collecting and Borrowing Cultural Material (DCMS 2005)* pages 10-11

and then only after proper consideration by the Museum's Board of Trustees, having regard to the interests of other museums.

This Policy was approved by the Trustees of the British Museum on 4 July 2013 and will be reviewed no later than 2018.

Annex to the British Museum's Policy on Acquisitions

The British Museum will comply with, or follow:

UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Cultural Property (14th November 1970)

Return of Cultural Objects Regulations 1994

Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, dated 3 March 1973 (CITES)

Treasure Act 1996

Treasure Act 1996 Code of Practice (Revised) England and Wales

Human Tissue Act 2004

Combating Illicit Trade: Due Diligence Guidelines for Museums, Libraries and Archives on Collecting and Borrowing Cultural Material (DCMS 2005)

Spoilation of Works of Art during the Holocaust and World War II period: Statement of Principles and Proposed Actions (NMDC 1998)

Code of Professional Ethics of the International Council of Museums (ICOM)

Code of Professional Ethics of the Museums Association (MA)

Code of Practice on Archives for Museums in the United Kingdom