

---

Towards 2020  
**The British  
Museum's Strategy**



# 1. Principles and Purpose

- The British Museum is an Enlightenment ideal. Its Trustees are responsible for making it, in each generation, a continuing reality.
- In 1753 Parliament created a museum which would foster the study of human societies through time and across the globe. The collection was to be available, free of charge, to all visitors, native and foreign. It was to be the collection of every Citizen of the World. Today it is probably the most comprehensive survey in existence of the material culture of humanity. The collection's international significance is now so great that it is hard to see how it can be considered as anything other than a national responsibility, ultimately underwritten by Parliament.
- The British Museum was the first national museum in the world. It was the first public institution to be called British – because it was not (like the continental museums) the collection of the King but a collection for the citizen. It was the first Trustee Museum, a form of governance which ensured it could not be controlled by Government, but must be preserved and managed in the interest of its beneficiaries present and future.
- Its purpose, then and now, was to be a place of scholarly inquiry, taking its place in the world-wide republic of letters. In the 250 years of its existence, it has contributed significantly to the world's understanding of itself. It continues to do so today.



## 2. The Museum Now

### 2.1 The Collection

- The collection now ranges from the earliest human artefacts to the present day.
- Most areas of the world are represented.
- The study collections are securely, but inconveniently housed in three locations. The World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre will help but will not solve this.
- The displays in the public galleries are adequate, but most need rethinking and renewing. Above all, the collection needs to work better aesthetically.
- The absence of European paintings makes the presentations of the collection less Euro-centric, more immediately global, than in any comparable institution.
- With over two million object records available online, more of the British Museum's collection is now available and studiable worldwide than any other. We need and intend to go further.
- The collection lacks resources to acquire in key areas of interest and research.

### 2.2 Conservation and Scholarship

- The Conservation team, of international distinction, is poorly housed. The World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre due to open in 2014 will help remedy this.
- In both conservation and curatorial scholarship, the British Museum fully participates in the international research community.
- There is a strong latent demand across the world for access to the British Museum's curatorial expertise. With publications in all media, the Museum generates and disseminates important scholarship in all areas of the collection.

### 2.3 People

- The British Museum Board of Trustees is now more international than at any point in our history.
- We employ around 1,000 people and are supported by over 600 volunteers.
- Many of our staff are among the world's leaders in their fields.

### 2.4 Buildings

- The London Bloomsbury site has suffered decades of under-investment. Much money needs to be spent.
- The World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre will open in 2014.

### 2.5 Visitors

#### *London*

- Roughly six million people a year visit the British Museum in London. If more are to be accommodated, as they should be, major alterations to the building will be needed.
- The current mix of visitors from London, the rest of the UK and the rest of the world, and the diversity of our visitors seem sustainable and roughly appropriate.
- Encouraging regular visiting of the permanent collection is the priority in this area.
- British Museum membership has increased greatly in recent years and now stands at 40,000.

#### *Rest of UK*

- The composition of touring exhibitions and long loans to Partnership Galleries ensures that the collection is seen each year by millions outside London.

#### *Rest of the World*

- Touring exhibitions allow around two million people outside the UK to see different parts of the collection every year, and demand continues to increase.

#### *Visits Online*

- Many more people visit the Museum online than visit us in London , with well over 24 million in 2011-2012. This figure is growing rapidly.

### **2.6 Money**

- The main source of income is government grant-in-aid, which makes up about half of our total income.
- Earned income from exhibitions, consultancies, trading, publishing, hospitality and training, and gifts from sponsors and other benefactors has been growing steadily in recent years.
- The Trustees hold restricted reserves tied to particular activities, and unrestricted funds to cover running expenses for a short period.

### **2.7 Public Engagement**

- The Museum has the most extensive touring exhibition programme, UK and worldwide, of any comparable institution. We are one of the largest lenders to the world, and have the widest reach.
- Recent exhibitions, public programmes and debates have established the Museum as a place where major issues of the modern world can be explored and discussed in the light of the collection.
- *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, the ground-breaking BBC and British Museum radio series, has strengthened perception of the Museum as a global resource for understanding.

## 3. Looking to 2020: The Museum for the Global Citizen

### 3.1 The Museum of the Citizen

- New technologies allow the Enlightenment ideal to be given a quite new reality. It should be possible to make the collection accessible, explorable and enjoyable, not just for those who visit, but to everybody with a computer or a mobile device. It can become the private collection of the whole world.
- The more the Museum rises to this challenge, the greater will be its impact on community cohesion and understanding, domestically and internationally.
- The range of the collection, the authority of the Museum's scholarship and the skill with which it is presented and mediated should make it one of the most significant resources anywhere for understanding how humanity has experienced and shaped, understood and imagined the world.
- This is the greatest prize, the central ambition. It can be broken down into a number of separate, but related challenges and opportunities.

### 3.2 The Collection

- By 2020 the majority of the collection will be housed onsite in Bloomsbury, London in optimum conditions, easily available for study and professionally managed.
- Decisions about the future of the Museum's offsite storage should have been taken and acted on.
- A programme of long-term loans to museums in the UK and abroad should be in place and recognised as unique contributions by the British Museum to the wider community.

### 3.3 Security and Conservation

- The collection is a major international resource and safeguarding it for future generations is a national responsibility.



A Museum conservator cleaning a Qing period cloisonné vase.

### 3.4 Scholarship

- The Museum exists to generate knowledge and understanding, exploring the past through archaeology, anthropology, art history and scientific examination. In each area it must be able to recruit and retain leading experts from all around the world.
- A number of international research programmes should be in train, some with university partners, exploring wide-ranging themes which arise from the strengths of the collection - like the unity of the Indian Ocean, religion and the state in late Antiquity, and settlement patterns on the Nile over the last 5,000 years.
- Key international research partnerships should be in place with museums across the world.
- The digital support necessary for international co-operative research should be in place allowing collaboration with many different institutions over great distances.

### 3.5 The Museum in London

- The Museum is and must remain part of the public realm of the UK - a place that is free to all, a place of study and enjoyment, of quiet exploration or public festival.
- The physical experience of visiting the Museum must be transformed. The visitor should have the sense of entering a world apart, yet one that belongs to them, a world of beauty and wonder and inquiry.
- Navigation within the Museum and exploration of the collection will depend increasingly on mobile technology and will be personalised.
- The Museum holds probably the greatest collection of sculpture in the world. It needs to be presented as a supreme aesthetic achievement, to be enjoyed as well as studied. Location and visual impact will be paramount.
- The public galleries will be concentrated on the ground and first floors. Space will need to be reallocated to ensure proper representation of the non-Mediterranean world.
- Object in Focus exhibitions and regular displays of light sensitive material will require prominent and appropriate spaces.
- Permanent displays will address longer time scales than at present (more often bringing the story up to the present day), and will tackle themes that cross the existing departmental boundaries.
- A rolling programme of structural renewal will continue with increased urgency.



Artist's impression of the  
WCEC from Montague  
Place at twilight.

### 3.6 Exhibition and public programme in London, the UK and the World

- The guiding principle is the conviction that the world needs new histories to make sense of the present. Those histories must be told by many voices. The Museum must be a space in which contested readings of history may be heard and discussed.
- The public appetite for serious exhibitions, lectures and discussions is large and growing.
- We will need an exhibition programme planned on a 5-7 year cycle, which balances intellectual engagement with popular appeal and commercial opportunities.
- The programme of debates and lectures should expand to attract visitors and underline the Museum's role as a place of public inquiry, a civic forum.
- The programme of exhibitions will continue to address large historical questions and current political issues. Smaller shows will present and explore different parts of the collection. As far as possible, exhibitions devised for the Museum will travel the UK and the world.

### 3.7 The Museum in the UK

- As the first British public institution, the British Museum will be profoundly affected by the political future of the UK. This will be critical for the activity of the Museum in these islands.
- On the assumption of a broad status quo, the Museum must become more fully available to all the citizens of the UK.
- This means developing further our partnerships with many regional museums and galleries, allowing them to draw on the collections and expertise of the British Museum.
- Programmes designed for specific communities must continue, and may be sometimes best delivered through our partner museums.



The opening of the newly refurbished Yorkshire Museum, York 2010, featuring items lent by the British Museum.

### 3.8 The World's Museum

- For the first time in history it is now possible thanks to changes in transport and technology, to be a museum for the whole world. The British Museum can achieve its founding purpose only through partnerships and exchanges with sister institutions. Building that network has already begun. Extending it is a high priority.
- Long co-operations with museums in Europe and the US are flourishing and growing.
- In Asia, Africa and Australia Memoranda of Understanding are in place with some key institutions. More need to be established.
- Training and skill-sharing programmes developed over recent years are building a global community of curators, conservators, scientists and museum professionals. The British Museum is particularly well-placed to develop and expand this.
- This global community of museums provides the ideal context for the shared study and display of the British Museum's collections, allowing joint research programmes, the circulation of exhibitions, and the exchange of people and skills.
- The success of the last five years in this area shows how much can be achieved. Finding people and resources to realise this potential is a high priority.



Meru County Museum,  
Kenya, Meru impromptu  
object handling and cleaning  
session, March 2012.



### 3.9 Publishing, Broadcasting and Digital Media: the British Museum in your pocket

- The familiar architecture of knowledge has dissolved. The Museum needs to rethink completely how it transmits information about the collection, and how it engages its visitors with the objects. New technology allows new ways of visiting the galleries: stories and images, enquiries and interactions, individual and group explorations all need to be crafted and promoted. And those who can never visit may now be enabled to experience, learn and enjoy.
- For the British Museum to take its proper place in the digital world requires access to external expertise. To achieve the desired reach, we need sustained partnerships with technology companies and digital publishers.
- English will remain the main language for Museum information. But long-term campaigns to provide material in Arabic and Chinese are essential.



Children from Argyle Primary School taking photos in Room 9 (Assyrian reliefs), on a Samsung Digital Discovery Session.

### 3.10 Money

- The development of staff to deliver this new Museum - the refashioning of the building, the re-deployment of the collection and the extension of activities - will require substantially increased revenue and large injections of capital. Fortunately the Museum is now in a position to seek support all over the world. Nevertheless, a realistic level of ongoing government support is critical if the Museum is to remain a world-class institution.

### 3.11 People

- A programme like this will make great demands on staff. The key challenges will be motivation and reward.