

Large print guide



# Collecting and empire

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The British Museum was founded in 1753 and its history and collection are intimately linked to that of the British Empire. From around 1500 to the mid-20th century, a number of European countries established and maintained overseas empires – Britain's was the largest. A substantial part of the wealth of the British Empire came from the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial exploitation of people and resources.

This trail highlights objects predominantly acquired during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It shows the different, complex and sometimes controversial journeys of objects to the Museum. Often, objects were collected first by individuals or organisations, sometimes passing through several owners before coming to the Museum.

This trail takes in several galleries, most of which are on the Ground floor. Viewing all the objects, in

the order listed, will take around 60 – 70 minutes. When you visit each object you'll find more information there about how the Museum acquired it. That information is repeated here in this book in large print format.

Please look out for this graphic to help you find the objects.



Further objects will be added to this trail in the future as the result of ongoing collaborative work and research.

Please note that the Museum regularly lends objects to other institutions around the world. This means that occasionally some of the featured objects may be temporarily removed from display.

## Room 4: Egyptian sculpture

### Lion statues of Amenhotep III

These colossal granite lions were commissioned by pharaoh Amenhotep III (about 1390–1352 BC) for the Temple of Soleb in Upper Nubia (northern Sudan), then a colony of pharaonic Egypt. Around 1,100 years later, when the powerful and independent kingdom of Kush ruled the area, these already ancient sculptures were shipped 420 km south up the Nile to a royal palace at Jebel Barkal.

Lord Prudhoe, the Duke of Northumberland (1792–1865), undertook a series of journeys to Egypt and further up the Nile into Sudan. In 1829 he visited Jebel Barkal and while there he arranged the shipment of the lions back to England, at a time when increasing numbers of Egyptian antiquities were being brought to Europe by private collectors. The British Consul General

in Cairo helped secure the necessary firmans (permissions) from the authorities. Lord Prudhoe donated the lions to the British Museum in 1835.

### **Colonialism: ancient and modern**

Egyptian rulers tended to conceive of Northern Sudan as an extension of their territory, both in ancient times and during the 19th century. Lord Prudhoe's party was travelling into a Sudan recently conquered by Muhammad Ali, the ruler of Egypt. This conquest ushered in over a century of Egyptian control, and then Anglo-Egyptian rule, interrupted by a period of Sudanese independence under the Mahdist state (1881–98). Lord Prudhoe described Kushite architecture as 'a very bad copy of Egyptian, bad in design and worse in execution'. For him, the presence of these Egyptian lions at Jebel Barkal reflected a Kushite desire to emulate Egypt. However, the lions are now understood as examples of Kushite creativity in incorporating aspects of Egyptian pharaonic

culture within the context of long established local traditions.

## **Room 13: Greece 1050 – 520 BC**

### **The Exekias Amphora, about 530 BC**

This amphora by the potter and painter Exekias came to the British Museum in 1836. It was purchased in Paris at the posthumous sale of antiquities and art belonging to the collector and diplomat Edmé-Antoine Durand (1768–1835). The vessel was discovered in an Etruscan tomb at Vulci in Central Italy, on land belonging to Lucien Bonaparte, the brother of Napoleon. Durand built up a large private collection at his own expense. He described it as the result of '30 years of perseverance' and 'thousands of financial sacrifices.' He sold the majority of his collection to the Louvre Museum in 1821.

## Collecting Greek painted vases

Up until the 1830s, the majority of the British Museum's collection of ancient Greek vases comprised items made in Southern Italy rather than the Greek mainland. Most of these were acquired by the Museum in 1772 from the collection of Sir William Hamilton who, as British ambassador to the Kingdom of Naples, had acquired a large collection of Greek vases and other antiquities. The Exekias amphora was one of the first Athenian-made painted pots to arrive in the British Museum. It set a new standard in the understanding and appreciation of Greek painted pottery.

## Room 17: Nereid Monument

### The Nereid Monument, about 380 BC, Turkey

In the early 1840s, Charles Fellows, a traveler and antiquary, led two expeditions to Lycia (southwestern Turkey). He obtained the permission of the Ottoman Sultanate in Constantinople (Istanbul), to excavate at Xanthos. The Nereid Monument lay in ruins when Fellows discovered it. Once a firman (permit) had been secured, Fellows began to excavate and remove the ruined monuments, with funding from the British Museum.

Fellows had the expert assistance of sailors from the Royal Navy to move and transport the heavy stone sculptures and architectural pieces, which were floated on rafts down the river Xanthos to the ship HMS Beacon. This transported the finds to Malta, before they were shipped onwards to Britain.

## Antiquities and the Ottoman Empire

Within the Turkish Ottoman Empire lay many sites of Egyptian, Assyrian and ancient Greek monuments. Permissions (firmans) were granted to a number of British, French and German archaeological expeditions during the 19th century, to excavate these sites and remove objects and architecture. The first decree legislating against the export of antiquities from Ottoman territories was issued in 1869. In the same year, the Sultan Abdulaziz ordered the creation of an archaeological museum in Constantinople. Now the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, it opened in 1891.

Ongoing excavations led by Turkish archaeologists are now providing new information on the ancient site of Xanthos, but the exact design of the Nereid Monument, and the positioning of its sculptures, is still debated.

## Room 4: Egyptian sculpture

### **Block statue of Ankhrenepnefer, about 860 BC, Egypt**

In 1882, the British navy bombarded Alexandria to quell a nationalist rebellion, instigating 70 years of control over Egypt. That same year in London, the novelist Amelia Edwards (1831–1892) founded the Egypt Exploration Society ‘for the purpose of excavating the ancient sites of the Nile Delta’. The Swiss Egyptologist Édouard Naville (1844–1926) was employed to direct excavations, using local workmen. He started at Tell el-Maskhuta, east of the Nile Delta, a site he interpreted as the ‘storehouses of Pithom’ built by the exiled Hebrews, as recorded in the Bible in the Book of Exodus. Subsequent work revealed it to be the remains of a pharaonic town. This statue was found in that first excavation season during 1883.

## Diplomacy and scattered finds

The export of Egyptian antiquities was generally not permitted at this time. However, the Egyptian ruler, Khedive Mohamed Tawfiq Pasha (1852–92), and the French-run Antiquities Service, made an exception for this statue to come to the British Museum. It was effectively a diplomatic gift, as Tawfiq relied heavily on British support and financing.

The formal partage (division) of objects discovered by foreign expeditions soon became commonplace. A share of any discoveries could be exported, though significant pieces were to remain in Egypt. Over 16,000 objects in the British Museum collection come from Egypt Exploration Society excavations, including excavations after Egyptian independence in 1952. The revised Egyptian Antiquities Law of 1983 banned the export of all antiquities.

## Room 25: Africa

### Ancestral screen from Nigeria, 19th century

At the request of Kalabari chiefs in 1916 a number of ancestral screens were placed under the protection of P. Amaury Talbot, a British district officer in southern Nigeria. This apparently unusual appeal came in response to a period of religious persecution that swept the New Calabar towns of Bakana and Abonema in 1915 and 1916. This movement, initiated by the fundamentalist Christian leader and self-styled 'prophet' Garrick Braide, threatened the widespread destruction of Kalabari ancestral shrines. Talbot presented nine of these screens to the British Museum and a further two to the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Today, ancestral shrines are still commissioned and honoured by Kalabari people.

Caption: Ancestral shrine of Amachree I, Buguma, Nigeria, late 1920s. Photographed by British

administrative officer Edward Chadwick.

### **Palace door and lintel from Nigeria, about 1910–14**

In 1924 this door was displayed within the Nigerian Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, London. It was selected for inclusion by the exhibition's commissioner, Major C.T. Lawrence, who described it as 'the finest piece of West African carving that has ever reached England'. Lawrence borrowed it for the exhibition from the Yoruba ruler, the Ogoga of Ikere, Nigeria, who had commissioned it for his palace around 1910. It was carved by Olowe of Ise (1878–1938). The Museum eagerly petitioned to purchase the door and lintel following the Wembley exhibition. The Ogoga refused to sell the carvings, instead offering them as a gift 'free and absolute'. The Museum was advised to offer something in return for this magnificent donation. In 1925 a European-style throne was delivered to the Ogoga,

presented by the British Museum. It remains in use in the palace at Ikere.

Caption: Onijagbo Obasoro Alowolodu, Ogoga of Ikere (1890–1928) seen here (veiled) with his son outside the palace at Ikere. Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum, Charles Partridge collection, 1909.

### **British-Yoruba relations**

By the early 19th century Lagos island had become a major slave trading centre. Following the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, Britain was active in suppressing the importation of enslaved people to its colonial territories. In 1852 the British-installed Oba (king) of Lagos signed an anti-slavery treaty with Britain. Lagos was subsequently annexed by Britain and established as Lagos Colony in 1862, providing a base for the expansion of colonial jurisdiction across Yorubaland.



Images of Europeans were gradually incorporated into the works of Yoruba sculptors, reflecting the increasing influence of Britain in the region. This door records a historic meeting in 1901 between the Ogoga of Ikere and the British travelling commissioner for Ondo province, Captain William Ambrose.

### **Military tunic from Sudan, late 19th century**

This appliquéd tunic (jibba), worn by a Sudanese soldier, formed part of the spoils of war taken by Anglo-Egyptian forces at the battle of Atbara, Sudan in 1898. The pocket decoration indicates that it probably belonged to a senior army officer. After their victory at Atbara, Anglo-Egyptian troops raided the Sudanese enclosure and, following established practice for both sides of the conflict at this period, took clothing and personal items. Major General Sir William Forbes Gatacre (1843–1906), who commanded the British Brigade at Atbara, appears to have taken this jibba to Britain.

His widow, Lady Beatrix Gatacre, presented it to the Museum in 1909.

Caption: The Mahdist leader Emir Mahmoud following defeat at the battle of Atbara by Anglo-Egyptian forces, 1898.

### **Anglo-Egyptian involvement in Sudan**

In 1819 to 20 Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman ruler of Egypt, dispatched his army up the Nile to occupy northern and central Sudan. This period of occupation was brought to an end by a Sudanese nationalist movement led by Muhammed Ahmad (1844–1885), an Islamic religious leader and self-proclaimed Mahdi ('rightly guided one'). The movement's capture of Khartoum in January 1885 and the creation of the Mahdist state (1881–1898) led to Anglo-Egyptian involvement in Sudan and the birth of the present Republic of Sudan. Many followers of the Mahdi wore tunics (jibba), with appliquéd patches of coloured cloth,

as a uniform. This form of tunic was probably inspired by the everyday garments worn earlier by religious men in the region that were patched as they became ragged.

## **Room 26: North America**

### **Potlatch Kwakwaka'wakw mask from Canada, about 1910**

Since 2005 this mask (pictured above) has been on loan to the Kwakwaka'wakw run U'mista Cultural Centre on Alert Bay, British Columbia. The mask would have been worn and danced as part of a ceremonial celebration called a potlatch, in which rights and titles are publicly acknowledged. As a result of a potlatch hosted by Chief Dan Cranmer in 1921 this mask and many others were confiscated by the Canadian authorities.

Participating in potlatches was banned by the Canadian government in 1884 as part of wider national efforts to assimilate First Nations people. After discovering this potlatch, the Canadian authorities charged and sentenced 26 people to prison. They were offered lighter sentences on condition that they surrender their masks and regalia and never potlatch again. Those charged surrendered around 400 items which were sold to North American museums. In 1938 one of these museums sold the present mask to an English collector named Harry Beasley. His wife donated the mask to the British Museum in 1944.

Caption: The mask as it is displayed today in the U'mista Cultural Centre. Photo © Trustees of the U'mista Cultural Centre.

## **The 'Namgis (Kwakwaka'wakw) First Nation and the British Museum**

Daughter of Chief Dan Cranmer and Kwakwaka'wakw anthropologist, Gloria Cranmer Webster, identified this mask in a photograph of the surrendered regalia taken in 1922. This led to years of careful discussions between the U'mista Cultural Centre and the British Museum. Eventually the two institutions agreed a long-term loan of the mask to Alert Bay. It is displayed with the other potlatch regalia surrendered at the time. This loan has strengthened the relationship between the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nation and the British Museum and has led to productive collaborations.

This text was written in consultation with U'mista Cultural Centre, Canada.

## **West African drum, collected in Virginia, 1700-1750**

This wooden drum is the earliest African-American object in the British Museum. It was made by Akan people in West Africa over 300 years ago. The first enslaved Africans arrived in North America in 1619 and we assume the drum crossed the Atlantic aboard a slave ship, but this is not known for certain. Drums were played during these journeys and captives were forced to dance for exercise in order to keep them healthier amid the horrendous conditions. Around 1730, a Reverend Clerk acquired the drum in Virginia, then a British colony and now a state within the USA. The drum passed from him to Sir Hans Sloane in England where it became part of his collection, incorrectly recorded as a Native American drum. Recent scientific examination revealed that the main body of the drum is made from a variety of wood found in West Africa.

## Sir Hans Sloane and the British Museum

In his will, Sloane, a wealthy physician, offered his entire collection to the public in return for a payment of £20,000 to his heirs. Sloane's collection, with several additional libraries and collections, became the foundation of the British Museum, which was established on 7 June 1753 by an Act of Parliament.

Sloane's career as a collector began in 1687 when he became physician to the Governor of Jamaica, then a British colony. Sloane worked as a doctor on plantations worked by enslaved people. With assistance from English planters and enslaved West Africans he assembled a collection of 800 plant specimens, animals and local tools and personal items. On returning from the Caribbean Sloane married an heiress to Jamaican sugar plantations worked by enslaved people, profits from which allowed him to greatly expand his collections.

## Room 1: Enlightenment

### Puppets and masks from Java, 1700–1816

These objects were collected by Sir Stamford Raffles (1781–1826), a British colonial official. Between 1811 and 1816 Raffles was Lieutenant-Governor of Java, infamously known for authorising an attack on the most powerful Javanese court. During his time there, he amassed collections and reports on aspects of the island that appealed to early 19th-century European ideas about civilisation, particularly national history and antiquities. All of Raffles' papers were lost when the ship returning him to Britain in 1824 sank, so we will never know for certain how his objects were obtained. Stylistic features and the unused condition of the puppets and masks displayed here indicate that they were probably gifts or were purchased by Raffles, rather than being acquired through looting. Raffles' collection was donated to the British Museum in 1859 upon the

death of his widow.

## **The British in Java**

The French seized the island of Java from the Dutch in 1807 during the Napoleonic wars to gain access to local resources. After a successful military expedition by British East India Company troops in 1811, Raffles was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Java. He held the position until the island was returned to the Dutch in 1816. Raffles wanted Britain to keep Java as a colony because he felt Southeast Asia was of particular strategic importance since it connected British colonies in India with trade interests in China. He wished to establish a centre through which goods, such as ceramics, textiles, tea, coffee, spices and opium, could be freely traded to benefit the British. Unable to develop Java, Raffles established Singapore as a British port in 1819.

## **Soup plate from China, 1740s**

This soup plate was part of a uniquely painted porcelain dinner service commissioned by Commodore Lord George Anson of the British East India Company. The plate was bequeathed in 1892 to the Museum by Anson's relative, the politician Thomas George Anson, 2nd Earl of Lichfield (1825-92).

Chinese porcelains made at Jingdezhen for the British market were sent to the port city of Guangzhou to be shipped to Britain, via India, on East Indiamen ships.

## **The British East India Company and China**

European and American direct trade with China was dominated by the Honourable East India Company, which held a monopoly from 1672 until 1833. The East India Company traded many commodities including, in the early 19th century, opium grown in India and bought for recreational and medicinal use. The refusal of the Company

to reduce this trade when challenged by Qing government officials led to the First Opium War (1839–42). The Treaty of Nanjing, which ended the war, forced the Qing emperors to open further 'Treaty Ports' for international trade.

### **Shield from New South Wales, Australia**

This shield, of bark and wood (red mangrove), dates to the late 1700s or early 1800s. Broad shields such as this were used as defensive weapons against spears. The size and shape of the hole in this shield suggest it was pierced by a spear.

Although once thought to have been collected in 1770 by James Cook or Joseph Banks at Kamay (Botany Bay, near Sydney), it may have been obtained from its owner between about 1790 and 1815 and sent to London by a colonial governor or other collector.

It is the earliest known Aboriginal shield from Australia and has come to symbolise the first British colonization of Australia and its ongoing legacy, which still affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia today.

### **The colonisation of Australia**

Australia has been inhabited for at least 60,000 years. Although William Dampier visited the northwest coast of Australia in the late 1600s and James Cook sailed up the east coast in 1770, permanent British occupation began in 1788 with a 'First Fleet' of ships carrying convicts to establish a penal colony at present day Sydney. In 1901, Australia became a country independent from the United Kingdom. Some Aboriginal people in central Australia remained out of contact with Europeans until the early 1980s.

The Eora people of the Sydney region suffered the first brunt of British colonisation from 1788.

Despite loss of population due to disease and frontier violence as well as displacement, Aboriginal people continue to live in the Sydney region maintaining strong bonds with their traditional lands and culture.

## Great Court

### **Totem pole from British Columbia, Canada, about 1850**

This pole was originally at the front of a clan house in the village of Kayang. It features crests – ancestral beings that mark identity and assign families with rights to stories and property. Around 1900, Haida Chief Wiah sold the pole to medical doctor and naturalist C.F. Newcombe and recounted the stories associated with the depicted crests for him. Newcombe sold the pole to the British Museum in 1903.

Caption: The totem pole in front of a timber house frame, Kayang, Canada. Frederick Dally, 1884.

### **First Nations of British Columbia and introduced diseases**

By the 1780s European explorers and settlers had introduced diseases such as smallpox and influenza to Pacific Northwest Coast peoples, who had little immunity to them. Many of these illnesses attacked older people who were knowledgeable leaders. Their loss threatened the political stability of communities and the transmission of knowledge and languages. When Wiah sold the totem pole, the village of Kayang had been abandoned for nearly 15 years. Kayang had once been a productive community but was devastated by epidemics in the late 1800s. Survivors relocated to the nearby village of Masset. By the time British Columbia became Canada's sixth province in 1871, sickness, armed hostilities and starvation had reduced indigenous

population numbers in British Columbia by more than half.

## **Room 24: Living and Dying**

### **Pukara, a painting from Western Australia, 2013**

This painting by senior men of the Spinifex people depicts important Ancestral Beings who created the landscape, people and the law which they abide by. Before beginning to paint on canvas, Spinifex people made ephemeral paintings on the body and on the ground. A series of major paintings created in the late 1990s demonstrated their customary law and helped to achieve recognition of native title.

Men and women of the Spinifex people also paint their stories and country in a form suitable for sale to outsiders. Their art can now be bought

at art galleries in Australia and around the world. This painting was created under the aegis of the community-based Spinifex Arts Project, and purchased in 2013 by the British Museum from the Outstation Gallery in Darwin, Australia.

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Some Aboriginal people in central Australia remained out of contact with Europeans until the early 1980s. The Spinifex people were moved off their ancestral lands when Britain used it for the testing of atomic weapons in the 1950s and 1960s. After a long struggle, their claim for native



title was recognized by the Australian courts in 2000.

### **Dance costume from Kiribati, 1987-2017**

This display was co-curated with members of the Kiribati community in the UK. In the Kiribati islands dance is a way of storytelling, remembering and passing on cultural knowledge. The community members were keen that dance should be a prominent element of this display. One of the participants, Victoria Burn, created the film nearby which shows a dance performance. When work began on this project during 2016 the Museum's collection did not include a complete dance costume, but only some of the elements that you can see here. The rest of the costume was acquired in 2017 through the contacts of the Kiribati community. Some of the additional items were donated, others were newly commissioned and made in Kiribati especially for this display.

### **Kiribati**

Kiribati (pronounced Kiribas) is a group of islands that straddle the equator in the central Pacific Ocean. Spread over a vast area spanning almost 3,000 miles, they lie approximately halfway between Australia and the Hawaiian islands. Formerly known as the Gilbert Islands, they were part of a British colony, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, until independence in 1979. The name Kiribati, the local pronunciation of Gilberts, was adopted at independence. The Republic of Kiribati is a member of the Commonwealth, a political association of 53 states, most of them former territories of the British Empire.

### **Milk vessel from Somalia, early 20th century**

This vessel was purchased by Diana Powell-Cotton during a visit to Italian Somaliland (modern Somalia) between 1934 and 1935. She travelled with her father, Major Percy Powell-Cotton,

but stayed on after he returned to the UK. Her background, social class and gender helped her gain a level of access to spaces and people that was unusual for the time. She formed close local relationships that helped her to collect everyday objects and to take photographs. The Powell-Cottons donated around 300 objects from Somalia to the British Museum in 1935.

### **From colonial Somaliland to independence**

European colonial powers were interested in Somalia because its coast was strategically important in controlling commercial sea routes around the Indian Ocean. In the late 19th century, Britain and Italy colonised parts of Somalia, establishing British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland respectively. In 1960 Somalia gained independence as the United Republic of Somalia, incorporating the former territories of the Italian colony and the British protectorate.