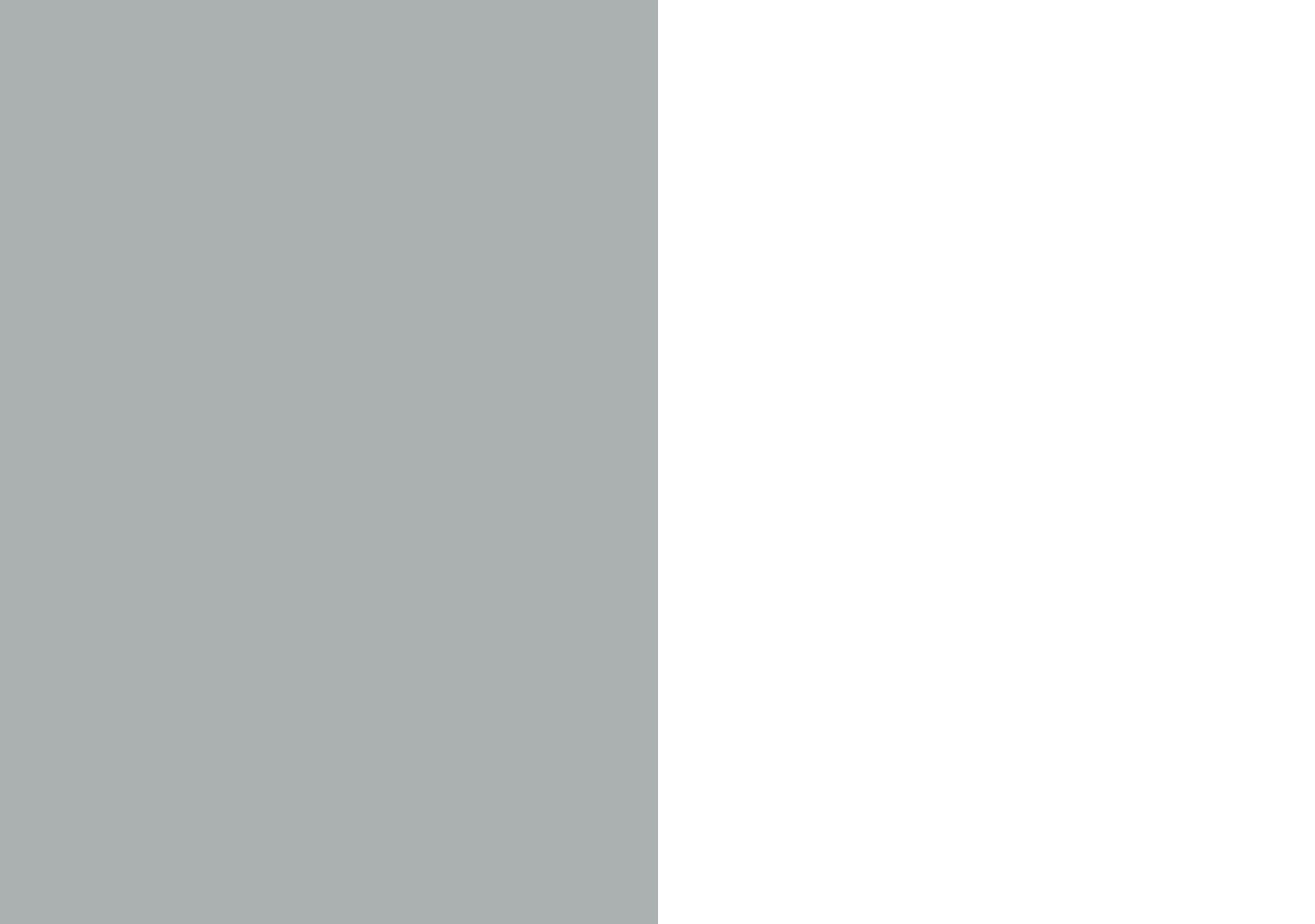


Working with the world

Review 2020/21





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Director's preface

***Working with the world* – this is critical to the way we function at the British Museum, whether through joint projects and research, training and skill-sharing, lending the collection, or display and interpretation. Everything the BM achieves is based on collaboration and partnership: with communities, institutions, audiences and individuals across the country and across the world.**

The pandemic has made this an extraordinary year. It is still causing tremendous hardship and loss in the UK and globally. It has also witnessed outstanding commitment, dedication and the unifying of people across the world to face this adversity. As a museum that works with the world, we cannot review the year that has passed, much less look ahead, without acknowledging this situation.

Since starting work at the Museum five years ago, I have never failed to be impressed by the numerous longstanding relationships colleagues from the BM generate and develop across the UK and on all continents. They are built on mutual respect, trust, openness, and a commitment to understanding and truthfulness. The work featured in this review is witness to these values.

National and global partnerships have been of particular importance in this most challenging of years, a year when few could physically come to Bloomsbury. We shared the collection on a global scale with the launch of our improved Collection Online database; international exhibitions continued to tour to Spain and Canada; fruitful curatorial discussions were maintained online; and our International Training Programme alumni helped us to collect objects that will tell the story of the global response to the pandemic to visitors in future years.

Two significant initiatives demonstrate the BM's commitment to working together with schools, communities and museums across Britain and throughout the world – the Samsung Virtual Visits and the newly launched African Histories and Heritage Collaborative Programmes. You can read about these innovative projects in this review. Neither would be possible without the external support we receive.

I am enormously grateful to our community of supporters for their encouragement and generosity in the past year, even during periods of closure. The commitment from donors, sponsors, Patrons and Members has been nothing short of extraordinary and they helped to ensure the BM remained a vital resource for millions of people during these straitened times.

Our digital channels flourished as never before, as they allowed us to stay in close contact with the world during lockdown. The Museum speedily embraced the vision of a 24/7 online museum this year and we saw 3.75m visits to the Collection Online, an increase of 60%; digital events engaging audiences in excess of 1m from over 50 countries; and over half a million new social media followers globally.

Closer to home, the professionalism and resilience of BM staff in adapting to lockdown, furlough, reopening and then lockdown again have been nothing short of remarkable. We delivered a Covid-secure visitor experience for the permanent galleries, cared for and secured the collection both with visitors and without, and provided an outstanding and diverse online visitor experience. It is impossible to praise my colleagues too highly for their flexibility and commitment in the most trying of circumstances.

We are ready to welcome back our audiences, though this will be a gradual recovery. As the restrictions start to lift, this summer presents an opportunity for domestic visitors in particular to re-engage and re-explore the collections on their doorstep, including three exciting new exhibitions on Thomas Becket, the Roman emperor Nero, and modern and contemporary art from the Middle East and North Africa. I hope many people will take advantage of this moment to visit and for those who cannot, that they will continue to engage with the content we freely share online. More than ever, the British Museum is a place for everyone to explore, study and enjoy, to be enlightened and to grow.

Hartwig Fischer
Director

Chairman's foreword

I've had the amazing privilege of being involved with the British Museum over a very long period: eight years as a Trustee followed – after a suitable interval – by another eight as chair. As my time on the Board finally draws to a close, I'd like to reflect on some of the ways this extraordinary institution has developed over the past 20 years, and on the great opportunities that lie ahead.

At Bloomsbury, the opening of the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery means that curators and designers for the first time have had the space in which to do justice to big temporary exhibitions. It's been wonderful to see how they've learnt to make best use of this new freedom. The Citi exhibition *Arctic: culture and climate*, so sadly cut short by the pandemic, was a prime example, and so now is *Nero: the man behind the myth*.

Just as important has been the opening of the World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre. The collection must be preserved for the benefit of future generations, and it has to be used to generate new knowledge. The Museum is now in a great position to meet these responsibilities, with its world-class laboratories and the capacity to welcome scholars from around the globe.

Permanent exhibition spaces have been rebuilt or refreshed. The China and South Asia gallery is just one example. This was made possible by the extraordinary generosity of former Trustee Sir Joseph Hotung, who supported the original display in 1992 and the rebuild in 2017. They were opened on both occasions by Her Majesty the Queen.

The BM sees itself as a lending library for institutions all around the UK. Its loans to museums across the regions and nations have been on a strongly rising trend over the past 20 years, bringing sharp increases in visitor numbers wherever they go. It has also built on its long-term relationships with partner museums, two current examples being the development of new galleries in Norwich Castle Keep and Manchester Museum. Far more British people now see BM objects on display around the country than they do in London, and the Trustees are determined to be even more ambitious on this front.

Another vital role is the support of the Portable Antiquities Scheme. Starting over two decades ago, it has now registered more than 1.5m objects, mostly found by detectorists, and has shed new light on the history of the UK.

The global reach of the BM has also increased significantly over the past 20 years. Improvements in transport logistics have made it possible to increase the volume of international loans, bringing goodwill and cultural understanding in their wake. Two of the most spectacular loans in my time were the Cyrus Cylinder to Tehran in 2010, and a Parthenon sculpture to St Petersburg in 2014. Travelling exhibitions have also been a feature. A moment to remember was when enormous queues built up around the Shanghai Museum as crowds pushed into the *History of the World* show, which has now been seen by more than two million people on its travels.

The Museum's activities around the world are built on strong partnerships. One example was the wonderful *India and the World: A History In Nine Stories*. Presented in Mumbai by the CSMVS Museum and at the National Museum, New Delhi in collaboration with curators from London, the exhibition featured a large number of objects on loan from Bloomsbury. Knowledge exchange is key. So the Trustees take particular pride in the Iraq Scheme, which helps Iraqi colleagues address the damage to their heritage caused by ISIS. The BM has also been active for years in joint programmes with its partners in West Africa, and important new projects are now getting under way in the region, among other things assisting colleagues in Benin City to explore their pre-colonial history.

None of this would have been possible without the generous support of our donors, sponsors, patrons, and Members – whose numbers have risen five-fold over the past 20 years. Their support has been all the more vital during a period of more than a decade in which the Government's Grant-in-Aid has been under pressure, and they have remained wonderfully supportive all the way through the lockdown. All the same, the pandemic has had a juddering impact on private-sector income, and we are hugely grateful to the Government for a temporary increase in support that helped us to balance the books last year.

The BM is now entering one of the most exciting phases in its long history. It has made good progress with its digital offering over the past 18 months – the relaunch of the Collection Online with more than 4m objects made accessible was one of the big successes of last year – but there is much more to be done. Elsewhere, work is well underway on the new BM Archaeological Research Collection in Reading, which will be home to large parts of the study collection, and provide great research facilities for scholars and students.

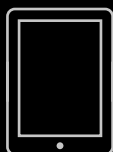
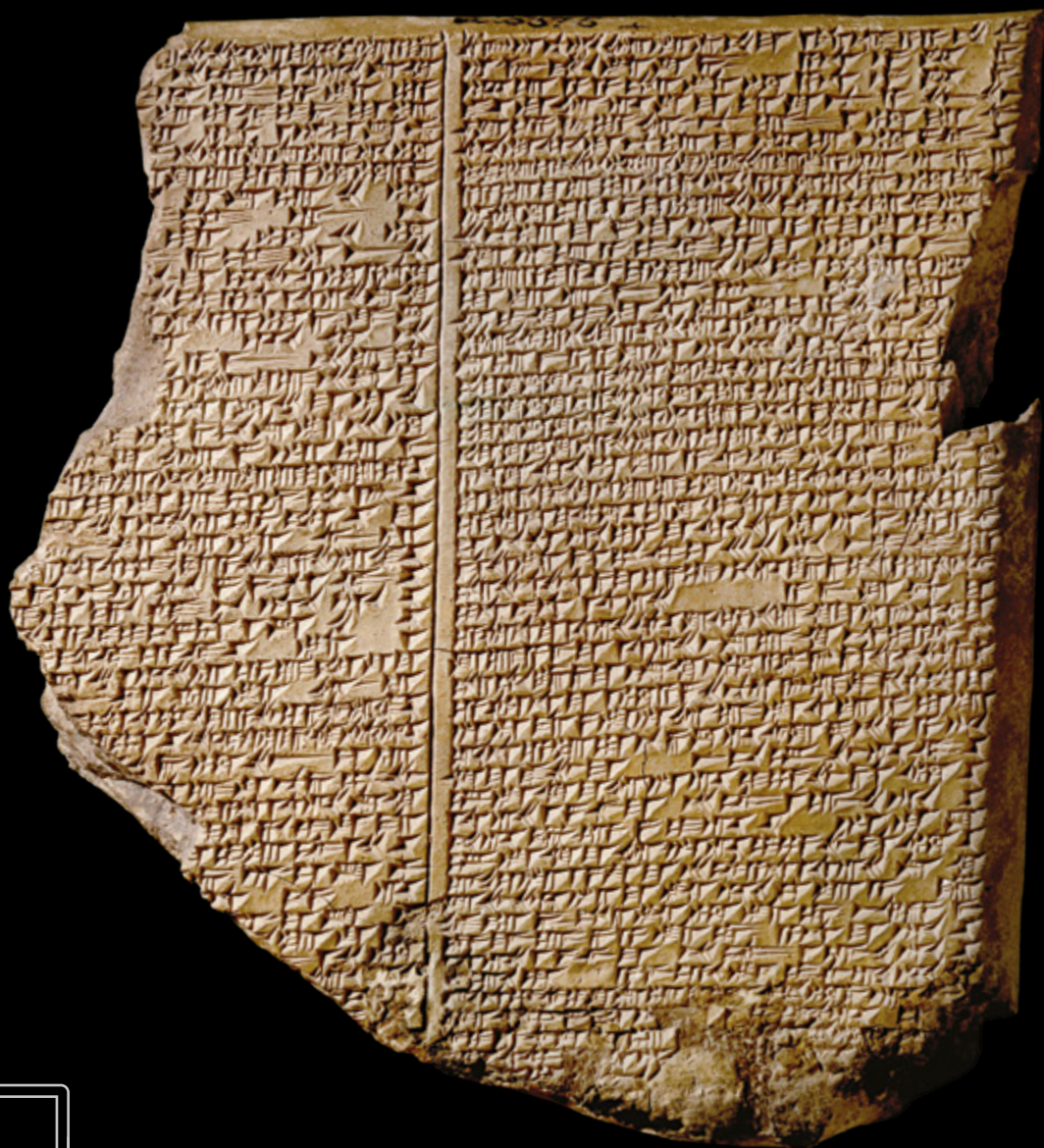
And then comes the big one: what we call the Rosetta project. This is director Hartwig Fischer's plan to reshape the BM's displays and programming to unlock the potential of the collection for everyone – for visitors in Bloomsbury, as well as for audiences across the UK and the world. The transformation will restore the fabric and infrastructure of Bloomsbury, and at the same time rethink the permanent galleries in such a way as to give more prominence to parts of the collection which are at present under-represented in the public spaces, and to make it easier to compare and contrast the different cultures around the world and across the millennia. At its heart, the project will pioneer new ways of working in partnership with our networks, nationally and internationally, to expand the Museum's impact and outreach. No other museum in the world has the capacity to help us understand our common humanity in this way.

It's a thrilling project that will take some years to complete and will require financial and intellectual support from both the public and private sectors. When completed, it will make the Museum fit for purpose through the 21st century, and ensure that it continues to meet the terms set out by Parliament in the British Museum Act of 1753, which stated that: 'Free access to the said general repository, and to the collections therein contained, shall be given to all studious and curious persons', a founding vision to which I know the Trustees and staff will remain committed in the years to come.

Sir Richard Lambert
Chairman of the Trustees

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(to December 2020)
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QC (Hon), FBA



The BM on YouTube

BM videos are seen annually by millions of people around the world. One of the most popular is a short film on how to write cuneiform. This Assyrian clay tablet of the 7th century BC tells the story of a great flood from the epic of Gilgamesh. (16 x 14 cm)

A global community online

The digital BM in numbers

4.5m

BM Collection Online
relaunched, with 4.5m objects

3.75m

users look at the
Collection Online

14.1m

BM YouTube videos seen
14.1m times

2.1m

Curator's Corner discussion of
Sutton Hoo gains 2.1m viewers

1.1m

1.1m watch an online tour of the
BM's exhibition on the Arctic

5.8m

BM has 5.8m followers
on social media

3.1m

BM blog draws 3.1m page views

4m+

BM films, *Vikings Live* and
Pompeii Live, attract over
4m viewers



New museum in Benin City
In Nigeria, the Edo Museum of West African Art in Benin City is being designed by the architects Adjaye Associates. As part of new wide-ranging African partnerships, the BM is participating in excavations – the most substantial to date in Benin City – at the site of the new museum in advance of its construction.

African Histories and Heritage Collaborative Programmes

The BM has long been engaged in working with partners in a number of countries in Africa. In recent conversations with both longstanding and potential new partners, colleagues and institutions expressed their interest in newly defined collaborative projects focused on investigating and preserving cultural heritage. In 2020, the BM received a substantial gift from anonymous donors to support a new programme to enable a series of such collaborations. The funding reflects the donors' desire to support communities in championing their cultural heritage through research and public engagement, especially with children and young people, and to support the BM in making significant contributions to this vital work.

Working with the world

To be developed over a ten-year period, the African Histories and Heritage Collaborative Programmes (AHHCP) aim to deliver a range of innovative, high-impact collaborations. The projects will focus on diverse African histories and heritage: pre-colonial African histories and global connections; world histories of African descent; Africa's colonial-era history; and shared African-British history and heritage. Working with partners and colleagues in Africa and across the world, the BM aims through these projects not only to contribute to advancing research and public awareness of African history, but also to engage further in dialogues around African history and museum collections.

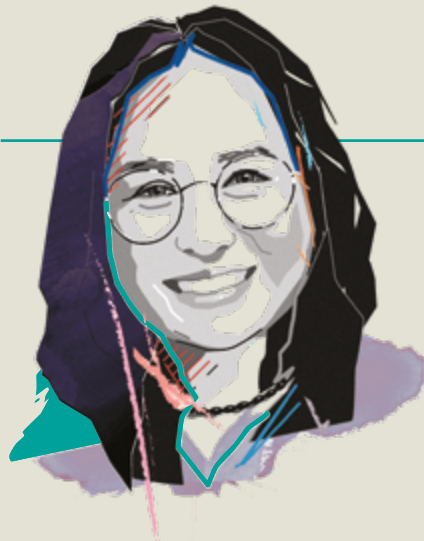
In Nigeria, archaeological research will be undertaken in Benin City, historically the capital of the Kingdom of Benin, one the most powerful empires of West Africa and known worldwide for the outstanding artistry of the Benin Bronzes, distributed around the world following the British conquest of Benin City in 1897. The project is a collaboration with Nigeria's Legacy Restoration Trust, developed with the approval of the Benin Royal Court and the Edo State Government, and in partnership with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Adjaye Associates architects, and community stakeholders. Critical archaeological research and heritage preservation will be undertaken on the future site of the Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA), a new museum in Benin City which will celebrate Benin's historic and contemporary arts. This will be the most extensive archaeological excavation ever undertaken in Benin City. The BM will also collaborate with other partners in the international Benin Dialogue Group to facilitate what will be the most important display of Benin works of art in the world in the future EMOWAA.

The diverse roles of people of African descent in the formation of the Americas are significantly under-researched and under-represented. A collaborative network will bring together researchers working on histories of African descent in the Caribbean and South and Central America. As well as providing a platform for re-examination of the BM's Americas collections, alongside the BM's Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence for Latin American Research, this will provide a broader forum for dialogue around this vital topic.

Dating back to the mid-19th century, early historic photography from Africa represents a rich but largely untapped resource, with the BM's own collections remaining largely under-studied. A project is now under development to investigate photographic collections at the BM alongside work with partners on collections in West Africa.

A further project under development will look at histories and heritage of pre-colonial West African kingdoms and their exchange networks, including the role of regional kingdoms and empires in medieval and later trans-Saharan trade networks. The project will be built around collaborations with museums and archaeological heritage programmes across West Africa.

Our voices



‘I am always awed by the fact that museums have preserved so many objects from human life.’

Mitsubishi Corporation Project Curator (Japanese Collections)
Akiko Yano

1

The job

I, as a team member, am responsible for the wide-ranging Japanese collections at the BM. In addition to looking after and researching the collection, we run a very popular public programme.

Before Covid, meeting people was a big part of my job, be it researchers, a group of students, colleagues from Japan, the UK and elsewhere, benefactors or diplomatic delegations. I find such occasions precious opportunities to learn the latest research and trends, and to showcase a selection of objects in the study room to explain what my colleagues and I are doing.

2

What inspires me

I was born and raised in Japan. My first memory of visiting a museum is the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, where we visited as a family when I was perhaps ten years old. Some of the horrifying images I saw there are still burnt into my mind. The first museum of Japanese art I visited, as a teenager, was the Tokyo National Museum. I am always awed by the fact that museums have preserved so many objects from human life. At museums I sense a lot of positive potential in being human, which inspires me and keeps me going.

In normal times, the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries would offer a hugely popular Way of Tea demonstration twice a month in collaboration with the Urasenke Foundation. The teahouse in the gallery was used regularly until the lockdown started. It is nice to see visitors become so animated when watching the traditional tea ceremony unfold in front of their eyes.

3

The future

I think that the core missions of museums to collect, preserve and research objects will continue to be valued in society. The way museums communicate will probably change. I would like museums to be seen by more people as being more open, communicative, accessible and a fun and comfortable place.

Supported by Mitsubishi Corporation International (Europe) plc

Individuals, companies and foundations support a variety of posts at the BM, broadening the work we are able to do.

Endangered Material Knowledge Programme

One of the BM's most innovative projects in recent years has been the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP). The pilot scheme was established in June 2018, with support from Arcadia – a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin. So successful has the international research programme been that in November 2020, Arcadia extended its funding with a grant of £8.8m. The new funds will enable the project to continue until 2028.

The perils of environmental change are increasingly in the news. Less discussed are the present-day risks to related cultural practices. Once the specific materials needed to make homes, clothes and household objects are no longer available, the knowledge of such practices, and the community value of handing them on, disappears. Social structures, often evolved over hundreds of years, are imperilled. Cultures begin to vanish.

EMKP aims to document these endangered practices. So far, the project has supported 31 projects in 23 countries. The latest topics range from cultural practices in Kenya associated with the baobab tree (used in cooking and as a habitat for mushrooms and bees, with rich associations in song, dance and myth) to the unique insight into ritual and tradition of the Dalai Lama's tailor, now in his eighties. Other participating groups generously sharing their knowledge and skills – the tools they use, the ceremonies, how the community is involved – include female potters in Papua New Guinea; textile weavers in southern Morocco; and builders of ceremonial houses (Oga Pysy) in Brazil.

Recording Andean potters

In Peru and Ecuador, researchers are recording potters as they describe how their craft relates to their culture and landscape. Here Oscar de la Cruz forms the body of a pot in Cuzcudén, Peru.

Covid posed its challenges in 2020. The advisory panel – aware that the impact of coronavirus could hasten the loss of endangered material knowledge – continued to meet online to ensure the grants for 2020 were awarded. For the safety of researchers and community members, the fieldwork was delayed until 2021, but scheduled to proceed as soon as was viable. In the interval, the BM offered digital training so that participating researchers, themselves based in countries around the world, were all working with the latest practices in recording and documenting.

Dissemination of the research is a crucial component of the project. The knowledge of the world's diverse cultural practices belongs to everyone. Project updates and the final findings are freely available on the EMKP website (emkp.org), as well as returned to the communities to support their own preservation of local cultural heritage.

'We are grateful for the passion of EMKP's grantees and the communities who have shared their wisdom,' said co-founders of Arcadia, Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin, 'and for the British Museum's expertise and support of this work. This endeavour will safeguard disappearing knowledge and make it freely accessible for the benefit of generations to come.'



Support for institutions in other countries

Supporting colleagues abroad remains a priority for the BM. Following the August 2020 explosion in Beirut, BM curators helped to assess the damage to museum collections. The BM is looking to support the repair of Roman glass vessels shattered at the Archaeology Museum of the American University of Beirut.

The BM's long-running International Training Programme (ITP), with lead support from the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust, had to be deferred. As staff returned from furlough, online events were organised for the existing network of nearly 300 ITP fellows. Twelve specialist sessions – led by colleagues from Scotland to Palestine, Uzbekistan to Rwanda, as well as BM staff – addressed practical skills such as interpreting objects and writing labels to wider intellectual topics such as international copyright and the socio-economic impact of heritage.

The Iraq Scheme, funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), was forced to defer its archaeological training until 2021. The emergency heritage programme has for the past five years combined training at the BM for Iraqi heritage professionals with practical fieldwork at two sites in Iraq. Graduates of the scheme in Iraq have continued to excavate. In the interim, the BM is preparing a substantial training manual on the practical needs of working in the field in Iraq. It will be translated into Arabic and Kurdish. Research from the previous seasons is being written up for publication, with digital reconstructions of the ancient sites including the 3D modelling of a 4,000-year-old bridge rediscovered at Girsu in southern Iraq.

The BM continued to be active in helping to counteract the trade in illegally sourced antiquities. The Circulating Artefacts project was completed in 2021. Funded by the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund in partnership with DCMS, the project worked with cultural organisations and universities in Egypt and Sudan, and auction houses and dealers to record and research more than 50,000 objects advertised on the open market and on social media. More than 1,200 images and videos of potentially trafficked objects were identified. The objects included tomb and temple reliefs, statues, votive figurines and hundreds of coffin and cartonnage fragments. The project also delivered training sessions and workshops for heritage professionals, students, teachers and relevant authorities in London, Egypt and Sudan, promoting a deeper understanding of the causes of the illicit trade and how to counteract them.



Looted wall plaque, 2400 BC

The BM works with the police and colleagues around the world to advise on enquiries over the illicit trafficking of antiquities. This rare Sumerian plaque was discovered for sale online. Identified by BM experts, it is being returned to Iraq. (Height 13 cm)



World's oldest bridge

For the past five years, the BM has offered archaeological training to colleagues in Iraq, especially where sites are at risk. This digital reconstruction shows a 4,000-year-old bridge rediscovered during fieldwork at Girsu in southern Iraq.

Fakes feature widely in the antiquities market. BM experts, who had been sent two trunks of clay tablets seized at Heathrow airport, grew suspicious when they realised that the group comprised an impossibly complete set of nearly every type of Mesopotamian writing: school texts, building inscriptions, administrative records. Closer examination showed them to be fakes: the cuneiform a blend of careful imitation and jumbled nonsense. The fake tablets will now be used for teaching, with some put on special display at the BM for a period of time.

If the cuneiform fakes were pretending to be old, the importer of a set of original glazed Uzbek tiles with Qur'anic inscriptions seized at Heathrow claimed they were 'modern replicas' designed to look antique and worth a mere £70. They were in fact, as BM curators and colleagues around the world confirmed, genuine tiles of the 13th–14th century from Samarkand and elsewhere being illegally transported out of the country. They will now be returned to the Republic of Uzbekistan. A Sumerian plaque offered for sale online was likewise found to be loot. The limestone wall plaque of 2400 BC shows a seated man holding a goblet and a palm frond, and is one of only about 50 in existence. The BM, working with the Metropolitan Police Service, has ensured this rare artefact will be returned to Iraq.

Around the world

The BM's international ties proved their strength in 2020. Where so much discussion and adjustment of plans was required, colleagues showed a remarkably inventive and positive response to the challenges of coronavirus worldwide.

Loans, both nationally and internationally, suffered substantial interruption. In many cases, loans were postponed, as museums across the world readjusted their public programmes. Colleagues around the world showed immense flexibility in finding solutions for the safe care and return of BM loans already abroad.

The BM's popular programme of international touring exhibitions had to confront a shifting array of lockdowns worldwide. No exhibition was cancelled. Some were installed, with varying periods of being shut and open again. Some were postponed. Overall, it was rewarding to know that even with the BM shut in London, the collection could be seen by visitors abroad.

The great success of these tours was the longstanding collaboration in Spain with La Caixa Banking Foundation. At CaixaForum in Zaragoza, *An Age of Luxury: from the Assyrians to Alexander the Great* attracted 49,000 visitors. In Madrid, nearly 70,000 people attended *The American Dream*, an exhibition of prints by Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and other American artists from the BM collection. A catalogue in Spanish was published to accompany the show.

In New Mexico, *Jesus Christ: Birth, Death and Resurrection: from Michelangelo to Tiepolo* drew 10,000 visitors, despite being closed for six of the eight months it was due to be open. In Canada, at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, a display of Egyptian mummies attracted 21,000 visitors. Continuing and rescheduled exhibitions include one on ancient Rome, on show in Belgium, and another on ancient Greek athletes and heroes, touring Australia and New Zealand in 2021–22.

International fieldwork had to be suspended. Yet BM staff and colleagues abroad continued to engage in research, publication and digital events. A major collaboration with conservators at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles included scholars from the UK, USA, Russia, Netherlands, France, Denmark, Germany, Austria, Poland, Greece and Hungary. Together they published a study of ancient Egyptian panel paintings, which included a surprise finding from the BM. Using non-invasive scanning electron microscopes, scientists discovered that mummy portraits were made not of cedar of Lebanon (as earlier coffins were) but of imported lime tree wood (*Tilia europaea*).

For an EU-funded collaboration with European museums and colleagues in Egypt, a BM conservator has been assigned to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo to work on their oldest wall-painting. Her work is part of a larger project, in which the BM is a partner, that includes advising Egyptian colleagues on museum interpretation, communications and income-generation. Fieldwork undertaken by the BM in previous years at a temple complex in Dangeil, Sudan, in collaboration with Sudan's National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, was shortlisted for an ICCROM-Sharjah Award in 2020 for cultural heritage conservation and management in the Arab region.

Much of this scholarship is available freely to anyone online. Among many publications, BM staff co-edited a volume on *Asia Collections in Museums outside Asia*, produced in collaboration with the Humboldt University, Berlin. Other international publications included a ground-breaking scientific comparison of the 93 impressions of a famous woodblock print by Hokusai, *Red Fuji*, found in collections around the world.

Digital content was by no means restricted to publication. For the online opening of the new Museum of Art and Photography in Bangalore, a BM curator took part in a Museums without Borders conversation with a curator in India, each offering an object from their collection and setting it in dialogue with the other. Lunch and Learn talks, delivered for employees of Mitsubishi Corporation worldwide, gave tours of Tokyo and Osaka in the 19th century, and examined animals in Ice Age art and early images of women.

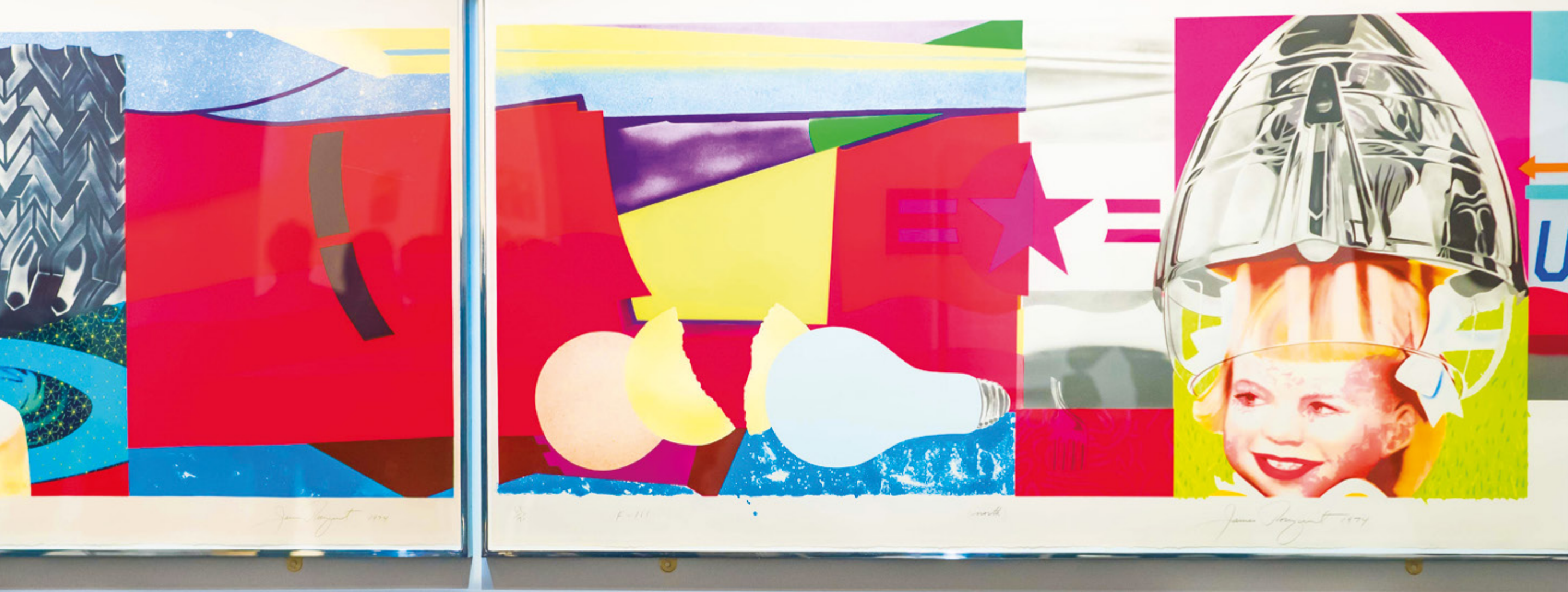
Global online workshops were organised as part of the BM's research project Cultural Creativity in Qing China, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The BM also offered training sessions through the Chinese Ministry of Culture for curators in China. Responsiveness to the circumstances of Covid was key. An international conference on archaeology in Cyprus, due to take place in Nicosia, quickly moved online, with speakers from Sweden to Australia joining in.



Male worshipper, 510 BC
This limestone head of a worshipper from the sanctuary of Apollo-Reshef in Cyprus was among 200 BM objects displayed in Spain in *An Age of Luxury*. The exhibition showed artefacts used and traded by the early empires of the Near East, including Assyria, Babylon and Iran. (Height 20 cm)

International touring in numbers

49,000	70,000	10,000	21,000
people in Spain see a BM tour of objects from Assyria to ancient Greece	attend the BM touring exhibition <i>The American Dream</i> in Madrid	visitors in New Mexico see Old Master drawings from the BM collection	visit a BM exhibition of ancient Egyptian mummies in Toronto



The American Dream

Despite the restrictions of Covid, a display of modern American prints from the BM collection attracted 70,000 visitors in Madrid. *The American Dream: Pop to the Present* included works by Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Julie Mehretu and, shown here, James Rosenquist.

Doors closed, screens glowing

What do you do when a museum is closed? During the Second World War, when the British Museum shut its doors from 1939–46, the answer focused inward. You ensure the objects are safe. You try to protect the building. You stay quiet until all is well again.

In 2020, people around the globe discovered just how far the world had changed. Objects had a vivid life beyond the galleries. The public had ways of visiting a museum from home. We had countless means of talking to one another: about cultures and histories, how essential they are to us and, as became powerfully evident, what they mean to us in times of crisis.

Years of developing a virtual BM – online, digitally diverse – came into their own in 2020/21. From scholarship to social media, the digital life of the BM thrived throughout the year. Sharing its resources around the world, the BM reached many more people in its online forms than it ever had before.

The biggest change was the launch in April 2020 of the transformed and much improved BM Collection Online. This new version of the online database of BM objects was brought forward, so that people under lockdown could benefit from one of the world's great museum collections. 'We are delighted to be able to unveil this major revamp early,' said BM director Hartwig Fischer, 'and hope that these objects can provide inspiration, reflection or just quiet moments of distraction during this difficult time.' The relaunch was the biggest update of the BM Collection Online since its creation in 2007. It now offers better access on mobile phones and tablets; more intuitive and powerful search technology, that is both easier to use and more accurate; and the whole portal has been given a major on-screen redesign. There are 4.5m objects, with 1.9m images, which can be downloaded free for non-commercial use.

With about half the BM collection now accessible via the website, the BM Collection Online is one of the largest, most diverse online museum collections in the world. In 2020/21, 3.75m users looked at the online collection, an increase of 60% over 2019/20. It is a truly global resource: 50% of users are from the UK or USA, with the rest from countries around the world. What they look for throws up some surprising data. Celebrated objects in the BM such as the Cyrus Cylinder from Babylon might be expected, as are new acquisitions, such as a recently purchased set of drawings by the Japanese artist Hokusai. More unusual in the top list was the search term 'mermaid'.



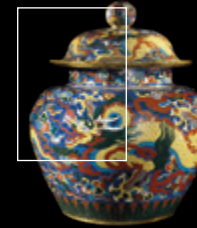
Searching for mermaids

The BM Collection Online was relaunched in April 2020. Popular search terms included China, Egypt, Marcus Aurelius and mermaid. This 'mermaid' ewer of a Buddhist female spirit was made in Inner Mongolia between 907 and 1125 AD. (Length 19 cm)



A world of detail

High-resolution photographs in the Collection Online permit viewers to zoom in digitally to examine some objects in great detail. This enamelled Ming dynasty jar of AD 1426–35 is decorated with a dragon. (Height 62 cm)





Discovering Sutton Hoo

The Dig (2021) told the story of Basil Brown and his discovery of the Sutton Hoo ship burial on the land of Edith Pretty in Suffolk. The film generated huge online interest in the finds. A BM video on the early medieval helmet (right) was watched 2.1m times. Many found the finds' survival inspiring. Star Ralph Fiennes told the BBC, 'When you see the treasures that came out of Sutton Hoo in the British Museum, I can only say it gives me hope.'

The object records are both a scholarly and popular source of cultural and historical knowledge. They permit new ways of engaging with a very wide public. Additional information supplied by some users can, once verified, be incorporated into the digital object record. Other scholarship online included analytical digital research based on the late works of the Japanese artist Hokusai, undertaken on the BM's innovative semantic research and knowledge platform ResearchSpace, supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Digital access to the BM remained busy throughout the year. Revenue from online shop sales by users who visited the main BM website increased by 53%. Downloads of schools learning resources rose by 39%. Popular subjects included how Egyptian mummies are made and Bronze Age and Roman Britain. Google searches that led users to the BM website spiked around key events, such as the launch of the film *The Dig*, with Ralph Fiennes and Carey Mulligan, in January 2021. The story of landowner Edith Pretty and archaeologist Basil Brown uncovering the Sutton Hoo ship burial enticed the public to learn more about the early medieval finds in the BM, a popular highlight of the Sir Paul and Lady Ruddock Gallery of Sutton Hoo and Europe AD 300 to 1100. A BM blog on the film's historical accuracy proved popular, as did a *Curator's Corner* video on Sutton Hoo, which attracted 2.1m views on YouTube and Facebook. There were numerous media requests for the BM to discuss the famous discovery in Suffolk on radio and television, both nationally and internationally.

Sharing across the globe

On YouTube, the BM attracted an impressive 14.1m views in 2020/21, with 3.3m hours of content watched, a 280% increase over 2019/20. Audience behaviour online during lockdown was different, too: those who watched just one video in the past were replaced by viewers accessing the site to watch a number of videos in one session.

Closure enabled the BM to experiment with new strands of videos. In *Decoded*, curators chose a single object and revealed its historical symbolism and hidden iconography. For the ten-part series *Objects of Crisis*, director Hartwig Fischer chatted to a different curator or academic each week. Together they explored objects from the BM collection that reflected a resilient human response to crises in the past. The videos attracted more than 125,000 views. Continuing features included the popular *Curator's Corner*, now in its sixth series. Experts shared their enthusiasm for prop banknotes featuring actor David Tennant from the TV series *Doctor Who*, a beautiful Yupik parka from Alaska, and one of the BM's most perennially fascinating objects, the Sutton Hoo helmet. The BM monthly podcasts also continued, with additional episodes marking special events, such as the UNESCO International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition.

Across all the BM's social media, numbers rose. At the end of 2020/21, the BM had 5.8m followers, an increase of over 550,000 compared to the previous year. The largest increases were on Instagram (25% rise) and Chinese platforms Weibo (48% rise) and WeChat (26% rise). The top posts featured celebrated BM objects such as the Rosetta Stone. Other popular items included images by Japanese artists Hiroshige and Hokusai and British figures such as Beatrix Potter and William Blake.



Access to the BM's blog more than doubled to 3.1m page views in 2020/21. Of the sixty new blog posts, it was no surprise to discover that the most popular by far was 'How to explore the British Museum from home', accessed by more than half a million people. The post was a useful introduction to the many ways to enter the BM digitally: self-guided virtual tours of the galleries using Google Street View, podcasts, audio tours, YouTube interviews with curators, web-based events and, of course, the 4.5m objects of the BM Collection Online. Many posts reflected people's interests during lockdown: cooking, craftwork, travel. Popular items included recipes from ancient Greece and Rome, and a travel guide telling you how to get to, and what to see, in the city of Nineveh in the 7th century BC – one of a number of historical city guides available on the blog.

Sharing across the globe

The BM could also be encountered on film, television and radio. The BM rebroadcast two of its highly successful exhibition films on YouTube and Facebook. *Pompeii Live* and *Vikings Live* took viewers through a pair of the BM's most popular past exhibitions with a team of experts discussing the displays. Each live broadcast attracted over 100,000 viewers. Still accessible online, they have since been seen by over 4m people.



Moving online
With the BM galleries closed, visitors flocked to the BM online, exploring diverse content for adults and children and expanding the BM's global audience.

On BBC4 in April 2020, *Culture in Quarantine* devoted an episode to the BM, with 400,000 viewers watching the initial broadcast. Historian Janina Ramirez narrated a tour of the galleries, identifying objects from around the world that reflected the perennial human concerns many were contemplating during lockdown: love, spirituality, death and the afterlife. In October 2020, classicist Mary Beard was filmed at the BM for her series *Inside Culture* on BBC2. She examined the Lewis Chessmen, learned how Agatha Christie once used face cream to clean archaeological finds from Nimrud and, as part of a programme exploring the relevance of museums today, welcomed visitors as the BM reopened after months of lockdown. On BBC Radio 4, the BM revisited its enormously popular series *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. Ten years on from its first broadcast, former director Neil MacGregor invited David Attenborough, Hartwig Fischer, BM curators and others to help him choose an object that summed up the past decade.

The meaning of collections
This papier-mâché figure was made in the 1980s for the Day of the Dead festival in Mexico. For historian Janina Ramirez on BBC4 and her BM blog, it was one of many objects in the BM that speak powerfully to us of the fears and hopes of the human condition. (Height 175 cm)



Exhibitions: Life in the Arctic

In a year when getting into a museum or gallery proved tricky, some cultural moments shone through. One was the Citi exhibition *Arctic: culture and climate*, supported by Citi with additional support from Julie and Stephen Fitzgerald and AKO Foundation. The *Observer* named it one of the top exhibitions of 2020. The science journal *Nature* included its catalogue in a roundup of the best science books. *The Times* selected the catalogue as one of its 2020 Art Books of the Year. Four thousand copies were sold.

From the moment you stepped in, the focus of the exhibition was circumpolar. With 400,000 Indigenous people from 40 different ethnic groups, the 4m people that make up the Arctic today are from Russia, Scandinavia, Greenland, Canada and the USA. But as visitors entered, a large floor map encouraged them to leave national boundaries behind and think about the region as a whole, about its landscape and peoples, about their shared experience.

An animated map on the wall encouraged another thought: climate change. It showed how the summer sea ice is expected to melt over the next hundred years. No discussion of the Arctic today makes sense without understanding the dramatic transformation of the north. Throughout the displays, the communities from across the north who participated in and helped to shape the exhibition discussed the threats to their ways of life and how they are responding.

In an immersive environment, where light and sound changes reflected the evolving Arctic year, visitors could see objects from across the north: colourfully beaded Russian snow spectacles, a Yupit mask with a blowing tube through which the wearer could imitate the sound of the north wind. An early 19th-century whaling suit from Greenland was both waterproof and inflatable. Salmon skin was transformed into a bag embroidered with caribou hair. Contemporary installations too showed visitors how tradition informs modernity in the Arctic today.

With limited access to the BM due to the Covid pandemic, curators and the events team organised a range of online ways to experience the exhibition. While restricting visitor numbers on-site, closure also presented opportunities to widen access to the show to audiences across the globe. A curators' tour, which introduced visitors to the exhibition, attracted 1.1m viewers. Talks and conversations described life in the Arctic and addressed the politics of environmentalism. Special guests included Siila Watt-Cloutier and Dalee Sambo Dorough, former and current chairs of the Inuit Circumpolar Council; Pirita Näkkäläjärvi of the Finnish Sámi Parliament; former Irish President Mary Robinson; and Mark Carney, former governor of the Bank of England. Speakers at a BM Youth Collective event in January 2021 talked frankly about what it means for young people to inherit climate change. An event marking Sámi National Day celebrated the Sámi way of life. The films and events can be seen for free on Facebook and the BM's YouTube Events channel.

This was an 'extraordinary show about extraordinary cultures', wrote the *Evening Standard*. Praise came from both arts critics and the scientific community, with magazines such as *New Scientist* and *National Geographic* singling out the exhibition for their readers. It was, concluded the *Telegraph*, a 'magical show'.

360°

A 360-degree online tour of the exhibition has been created to enable even more people to experience the show worldwide.



Cultures of the north

The Citi exhibition *Arctic: culture and climate* examined the lives of the different communities who inhabit the circumpolar north.



Changing ways of life

The exhibition set the history of the Arctic alongside the growing effects of climate change and how people are responding to transformations in their environment.

Exhibitions: Tantric transformations

'By passion the world is bound; by passion too it is released.' The power and paradoxes of Tantric philosophy took centre stage in *Tantra: enlightenment to revolution*, supported by the Bagri Foundation. The exhibition carried visitors beyond the Western associations of Tantra with sex and ecstasy to capture its rebellious spirit. Sculptures, paintings and other displays demonstrated Tantra's potential for opening up new ways of seeing and changing the world.

From its inception to the present day, Tantra has challenged religious, cultural and political norms around the world. A philosophy that emerged in India around the 6th century AD, Tantra has been linked to successive waves of revolutionary thought, from its early transformation of Hinduism and Buddhism, to the Indian fight for independence and the rise of 1960s counterculture.

A tantra is a sacred instructional text. The name derives from the Sanskrit *tan* meaning 'weave' or 'compose'. Tantras were often written as a dialogue between a god and goddess. The exhibition opened with some early examples: 12th-century folios from Nepal written in Sanskrit on palm leaves. From there the displays advanced chronologically, taking in the rise of Tantra in India, its spread to other regions and its later reconfiguration in the 19th century and on to today.

Tantra's celebration of women was a prominent feature. Shakti, divine feminine power, was explored through sculptures of Tantric goddesses such as Chamunda, Varahi and the *matrikas* or mothers. In an immersive space, visitors encountered 10th-century sculptures of yoginis from eastern India, displayed in a digital recreation of their original location in a temple at Hirapur. Yoginis were among the most important deities in medieval India, believed to be capable of shapeshifting into women, birds, snakes, tigers and jackals as the mood took them.

Later interpretations of Tantra showed its complex influence. Images of ferocious Tantric deities informed the way many colonial officials imagined India during the 19th century, as a subcontinent allegedly corrupted by irrationality. Indian revolutionaries played on this paranoia, reimagining these powerful gods and goddesses as symbols of anti-colonial resistance. Surprising later interpretations of Tantric goddesses such as Kali included the lolling tongue on the Rolling Stones' 1971 album, *Sticky Fingers*.

With lockdown limitations, the exhibition found life in print and online. The catalogue sold over 3,000 copies and a curator's tour of the show online was watched by over 800,000 people. Other videos on the BM channel looked at the wider presence of Tantric ideas. Experts explored its link with Hatha and Tibetan yoga, divine feminine power and the countercultural movements of the 1960s. A panel of artists from South Asia, USA and UK spoke about contemporary interpretations of Tantra, with online viewers asking questions as part of the live discussion. A partnership with the Centre for Bhutan Studies in Thimphu recorded in the mountains of Bhutan the creation and dissolution of a sand mandala, consecrated by a dakini dance, ceremonies and prayers. The mandala's central figure was the Tantric deity Vajrayogini, 'Queen of Enlightened Wisdom'. The film is available on the BM website.

Reviewers and visitors alike commented on the show's strength in recasting the popular notion of what Tantra is. 'The BM's enlightening exhibition', as the *Telegraph* put it, 'replaces Tantra-related clichés with revolutionaries, female empowerment and proper historical context.'

Tantra in numbers

800,000

people watch an online curator's tour of the *Tantra* exhibition



Tantra today

The exhibition *Tantra: enlightenment to revolution* examined Tantric philosophy from the 6th century AD to the present day. Contemporary works included this sculpture by Bharti Kher, inspired by the Tantric goddess Chinnamasta. (220 x 121 cm)





Tantric art
The exhibition explored Tantra through a variety of media, from early textiles and sculptures to modern artworks.

Woman visiting two Nath yoginis
Paintings such as this mid-18th-century watercolour illustrated the important role of female Tantric masters. (29 x 21 cm)



Learning and events

Before 2020, the BM's learning and events teams, drawing on the skills of staff across the Museum, organised hundreds of face-to-face events each year. The pandemic required a complete redesign of the public programme. Museum-based activities stopped in March 2020, but by the autumn, new platforms had emerged online to continue to engage young people and adult visitors.

The Schools programme, so central to the life of the BM, had to be paused. The BM's Samsung Digital Discovery Centre (SDDC) has been for years a pioneer of interactive and, more recently, distance learning. With the Schools programme forced to go entirely online, the SDDC came into its own. New live interactive workshops on Egypt and Greece were added to the existing three on Prehistory, Roman Britain and the Indus Valley. From September 2020, the number of Virtual Visits was increased. Teaching direct to classrooms and students learning remotely, the BM reached 8,000 pupils and teachers across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in 2020/21, with nearly 1,000 sessions offered until the end of the school year. In collaboration with the BM, Samsung KX also offered online learning resources for children and young people at home. Looking at five different architectural themes, users were encouraged to use drawing and other apps to make their own designs and share them on social media.

The Greengross Family Young People's Programme, supported by the Greengross Family, entered its second year. With lockdown in force, the Youth Collective quickly proved versatile in moving online. The 15 participants, aged 16–24, produced a series of video conversations and lectures based on the theme of 'change'. Easily accessed via their Instagram page (@bmyoungpeople) or on the BM Events Channel on YouTube, the videos ranged widely, from ideas of personal change to creative activism. The interviews included a Collaborative Doctoral Student discussing issues of representation in museums today and a forum on well-being and mental health.

Despite the challenges of lockdown, the BM ran over 30 online live events and short courses from September 2020 to March 2021 for the general public. These events engaged audiences in excess of 273,000 people from over 50 countries. More than half were between the ages of 25 and 44 and from regions outside of the UK. Almost all events included live captions for deaf or hard of hearing audiences. Much of the online programming centred on the BM's two major exhibitions (see pp.30–37). Edmund de Waal's installation *library of exile* inspired several events, including a popular talk about the great library of Nineveh in the 7th century BC, which attracted over 165,000 views. Writer Bonnie Greer curated a series of discussions under the banner *The Era of Reclamation*. Topics included the role of museums in debates about reclamation, African Europeans and fashion as resistance and power. Online language courses, offered in partnership with the CityLit, used objects as starting points to teach Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, Sanskrit and Norwegian.

Learning and events in numbers

8,000

pupils and teachers experience the BM collection using Samsung Virtual Visits

1,000

school sessions taught virtually to pupils at home

400

community groups visit the BM for a Covid-safe preview prior to the reopening

273,000

people join in online events and courses run by the BM during lockdown



Objects of fascination
This Chinese jade ring of 1200–1050 BC was later inscribed by the Qianlong Emperor in 1790: 'Where did this stand come from?' he asked. Courses run by the BM and the CitiLit, which moved online in 2020/21, use objects from the collection such as this as the starting point for language learning. (Diameter 16 cm)



In August 2020 400 community partners and key workers were invited to visit the BM, in a Covid-safe environment, ahead of the official public reopening. Audio-described and British Sign Language events moved online, with tours of exhibitions and highlights of the collection, supported by the D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust and the Wakefield Trust. A discussion day with disabled artists in February 2021 opened up ways of approaching and reinterpreting the BM collection. The JTI-supported Community Partnership Programme continued to engage disadvantaged adults by sending out home resource packs which offered participants the opportunity to explore and learn from the BM collection. With volunteer-led tours at the BM suspended, volunteers managed to make the news by working with staff and community partners to update the BM's popular LGBTQ collection tour. The *Guardian* reported that, through its connection to William John Bankes, 'one of the most famous objects in the world, the Rosetta Stone, is to have its little-known gay history explored on public tours for the first time by the British Museum.'

BM Youth Collective
Participants in the Greengross Family Young People's Programme for 18-to-24-year-olds are seen here, pre-Covid, exploring works by Rubens and other artists in the Prints and Drawings Study Room. In 2020, the programme quickly moved online, generating debate and discussion through video platforms.

With parents coping with lockdown learning at home, sales of the BM's books for children, published in association with Nosy Crow, rose by 300%. The series *Find Tom in Time* remained popular, with a new title seeing Tom turn up in Ming Dynasty China, as was a sticker book about ancient Greece. The leader by far was *British Museum: Around the World Colouring*, which sold over 11,000 copies. The BM's books for children are now published in more than 15 countries, including Portugal, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, Poland, Romania, Turkey, Korea, Japan and China.



'I hope that in future museums are more representative of our communities and better at engaging and reacting to changes within society.'

Greengross Family Young People's Programme Manager
Ashley Almeida

1

The job
I manage the Greengross Family Young People's Programme at the BM which involves recruiting a group of young people as a Youth Collective and working with them to co-produce content aimed at other young people. A great deal of my role is about advocating for young people at the Museum and making sure there's a voice for them. Throughout this last year I've been able to speak to various colleagues across the BM and have also been able to set up a new social media account to prioritise young people.

2

What inspires me
I first visited a museum when I was in primary school. We'd gone on a trip to a local museum and I had such a good time, I begged my parents to take me again at the weekend. I don't think I ever anticipated then that I'd ever end up working in the museum sector. I really want young people to understand that museums can be places for them. There's so much potential with museums, particularly working with young people and helping to build tomorrow's audience. Young people come with such dynamism and energy. The age range also means that I have the opportunity to work across the department, which I really enjoy and am looking forward to doing more of.

3

The future
I hope that in future museums are more representative of our communities and better at engaging and reacting to changes within society. More immediately, I'm looking forward to working with a Youth Collective in person. It's been unusual working entirely virtually, but it has allowed me to try different things that would just not have been possible in person. I hope to take a lot of the learning from this last year forward to make the programme as exciting as it can be for young people.

Supported by the Greengross Family

Individuals, companies and foundations support a variety of posts at the BM, broadening the work we are able to do.

National programmes

Disruptions across the UK during the pandemic put many cultural institutions at risk. The BM's national activities were interrupted, but lines of communication remained open. Continuing dialogue with partners around the country is reshaping future plans and targeting specific needs in a changing cultural climate.

BM touring exhibitions, supported by the Dorset Foundation in memory of Harry M. Weinrebe, remained at their venues. After locking down, *Nordic by Nature: modern design and prints* reopened to the public at Kirkleatham Museum, Redcar, from July to September. Over its four UK venues, the show attracted 38,000 visitors. At the Great North Museum: Hancock in Newcastle, an exhibition on ancient Iraq opened for two months, but was also accessible through a virtual version on the Hancock's website. *Pushing Paper*, an exhibition of 56 contemporary drawings from the BM's Prints and Drawings collection, was shown for six weeks at Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea, supported by the Bridget Riley Art Foundation.

National partnerships were more important than ever. The BM continued to provide strategic guidance for the development of the new South Asia Partnership Gallery at Manchester Museum. Creating new ways of working with community collectives will inform future approaches to co-curation at both institutions. In Norfolk, construction began to restore Norwich Castle Keep. The redevelopment includes a new medieval gallery, designed in partnership with the BM, that will showcase national medieval treasures alongside objects from Norfolk's own important collections. The Money and Medals Network, through which the BM supports numismatic collections across the country, had to move its on-site training events online, and between lockdowns was able to undertake two socially distanced assessments at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading and the National Waterways Museum in Gloucester. Online training has proved a success, with sessions attracting three times the usual number of participants. The Network is supported principally by Arts Council England.



Roman Britain on Royal Mail
A set of eight UK stamps issued in June 2020 showcased Roman Britain. The BM helped to select the images, which ranged from Hadrian's Wall to the Ribchester Helmet, which visitors can see at the BM.



Talking partnership
An exciting South Asia Partnership Gallery at Manchester Museum, supported by the BM, is drawing on a wide range of people and views.

Museum Futures, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, welcomed its third and final year of trainees. Focusing on digital skills, the UK-wide scheme gives 18–24-year olds from a range of backgrounds the opportunity to receive year-long paid training, enabling those without degrees or prior museum experience to pursue a career in the heritage sector that might otherwise have been unattainable. Partner museums in 2021 are the Museum of East Anglian Life, South West Heritage Trust, Fitzwilliam Museum, National Football Museum, The Atkinson, Museum of Cardiff, and Culture Perth and Kinross. With on-site visits initially unavailable, trainees were successfully mentored and engaged online. A new programme for young people, *Where we are ...*, supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, will run until 2025. The scheme will encourage participants to design inspiring projects in discussion with their local communities.

Fieldwork in the UK was suspended, so the BM's major archaeological collaborations about some of Britain's earliest history were delayed. All are due to recommence in 2021. Scholarship, much of it retrieving important research from earlier seasons, went online, with staff participating in seminars and conferences in Glasgow and Manchester, as well as internationally. Online lectures from the BM on Britain's earliest history were given for audiences in Norwich, Manchester and elsewhere. The most widely shared activity was the BM's collaboration with Royal Mail, selecting and introducing images of Roman Britain, from Hadrian's Wall to the Ribchester Helmet in the BM collection. They appeared on a set of eight stamps issued in June 2020.

Archaeological finds made by the public

‘We were turning up the soil and all of a sudden these gold coins popped out of the ground,’ the finders told the BM. Discovered by a surprised family in Hampshire out doing the weeding, the 63 gold coins, and one silver, turned out to be a Tudor hoard. Four were especially unusual, featuring the initials of Henry VIII’s first three wives. The coins were one of the outstanding lockdown finds of 2020, when metal-detecting was prohibited or restricted, but archaeological artefacts continued to be unearthed as people worked in their gardens. Another was a group of 50 1oz gold Krugerrands from apartheid-era South Africa in the 1970s, stashed in a garden in Milton Keynes. Both discoveries made the news.

Nearly 50,000 finds were registered through the BM’s Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) in 2020, over 1,000 of them cases of Treasure. They showed an impressive community spirit, as the public and PAS experts across England often had to work digitally to record and assess new discoveries. Unusual finds included a Roman furniture fitting depicting the god Oceanus (found in Hampshire) and a gilded and enamelled mount (found in Devon) featuring the white boar of Richard III. The medieval decoration was probably worn over armour on a low-slung belt.



Roman mount found in Hampshire
The sea god Oceanus features on this Roman furniture fitting discovered near Basingstoke. (Height 1 cm)

In July 2020, PAS reported its 1.5 millionth find, an astonishing record of Britain’s past voluntarily reported by the public since the pilot scheme was launched in 1997. It is freely accessible to all at finds.org.uk. The find, much reported in the media, was a papal seal (bulla) of Pope Innocent IV (r. 1243–54) discovered in Shropshire.

PAS continues to widen its audience. A podcast was launched in December 2020, and a second volume of *Finds Identified* was published to help people identify dress fittings and ornaments. The vast PAS database is proving a rich scholarly resource too: an article published in *The Antiquaries Journal* in 2020 analysed the 220,000 medieval finds recorded (so far) through PAS.

PAS in numbers

50,000

finds registered through PAS in 2020

1.5m

In July 2020, the 1.5 millionth find is recorded on PAS



‘When I handle an object, I feel like I am touching history and becoming party to other people’s stories.’

Curator of Renaissance Europe and the Waddesdon Bequest
Rachel King

1

The job
I work with the collections of Renaissance Europe and, in particular, the celebrated Waddesdon Bequest, given to the BM by Baron Ferdinand Rothschild. Now that I’m working at home my days have become fairly silent, but the emails fly thick and fast. I co-convene the Global, Local and Imperial Histories Research Group. This week, I have had discussions with university colleagues across the UK, my counterparts at Waddesdon Manor, and curators in the National Museums of Scotland, Hungary and Georgia.

The lack of access to objects I care for is not something which is easy to come to terms with. When I handle an object, I feel like I am touching history and becoming party to other people’s stories. Spending quality time with an object is like going to visit someone who has seen lots in their life and being able to learn from their experiences.

2

What inspires me
Sometimes, when face to face with an object, I’m so overwhelmed by the beauty and craftsmanship of pieces that I feel it physically. I’ve been told that my face completely changes in these moments. I remember very precise details, even down to what I was wearing or what the weather was like that day. In these memories, I am always alone in the room with the object, which is obviously not true, but the fact that I can erase all others shows the intensity of the moment.

3

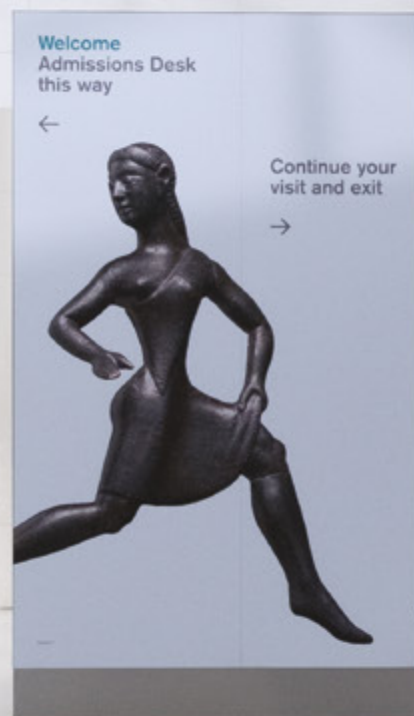
The future
I look forward to being part of the Museum as it opens ever more widely to people. I’ll be particularly interested to see what happens with special exhibitions, which so often require international loans or travel themselves, particularly as concerns continue to grow around our climate.

Supported by the Rothschild Foundation

Individuals, companies and foundations support a variety of posts at the BM, broadening the work we are able to do.



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A new way to visit

For two short periods, the BM was able to open to the public in 2020/21. Visitors pre-booked a time and followed an agreed route, with limited numbers and social distancing.

Reopening

The Covid pandemic, and the necessary steps to limit its spread, meant that the British Museum was closed for most of 2020/21. There were times the BM was able to open, following careful safety guidelines (27 August to 4 November; 3–15 December). Visitors had to book a free slot, and their visit followed a distanced, one-way route. By October some visitors were able to obtain walk-up tickets and access a place if any were available.

Despite these restrictions, and the novelty of booking, there was a hunger to visit. By the day of reopening, 20,000 tickets had been booked, and over the ten weeks before the BM had to close again, 135,000 people were able to visit. In total, 160,000 people visited the BM in 2020/21.

What they could do was varied. The visitor path took them past 9,000 objects, including some of the BM's most famous: the Rosetta Stone, Parthenon sculptures, Hoa Hakananai'a, reliefs from Assyria and the Benin bronzes. The tour later expanded to include some of the upper-floor galleries of mummies and artefacts from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Visitors could book tickets to view the two major exhibitions the BM had readied for public display: *Tantra: enlightenment to revolution* and the Citi exhibition *Arctic: culture and climate*. A Covid-safe visit to the BM in 2020 took in two special installations. Edmund de Waal's *library of exile* featured over 2,000 books by exiled writers from Ovid to the present day. Brought to the BM thanks to the support of AKO Foundation, the installation encouraged visitors to reflect on ideas of displacement, translation and the power of words to cross boundaries. A catalogue for the show was available widely through bookshops; the first printing sold out within five months.

Welcoming in London



To mark the reopening, Grayson Perry exhibited a previously unseen edition of his *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. The sculpture is a contemporary memorial to all the unnamed men and women whose skills produced so many of the objects in the BM, so many of the objects that shaped the development of humankind. The display, supported by Christian and Florence Levett, set Perry's burial ship next to another tomb, the striking Nereid Monument, built in 380 BC for a ruler of Lycia (in modern Turkey).



After months of closure, the reopening of the BM was a cause for celebration. Professor Mary Beard joined the Front of House team to welcome the first visitors. On Facebook Live, Professor Beard spoke with playwright Bonnie Greer and director Hartwig Fischer for a broadcast from the Egyptian Sculpture gallery that attracted 71,000 views. Extensive media coverage reported the reopening: newspapers around the world, bulletins throughout the day on Sky News watched by over 300,000 people, and live broadcasts on BBC Breakfast seen by over six million people each morning.

Starting and stopping

The work of the BM expanded and contracted throughout the year. With the initial furlough of most staff, activities were restricted mainly to security, collection care, digital and a framework of administration. Over time, as restrictions eased, the BM was able to respond to changing circumstances. Some work was quickly reconfigured. Distanced learning and community programmes were reintroduced or widened. Research for exhibitions and projects was allowed where possible, often from home but with some staff access to the collection when available.

Collection care was an essential focus of activity throughout the year, with some conservation staff remaining at work in the galleries and stores in a Covid-secure environment throughout lockdown. The changing physical environment of a museum without visitors posed new challenges. Ivory, for instance, is particularly sensitive to variations in humidity in the building, and so staff ensured such objects were monitored or moved to more stable storage. Regularly assessing over 700 monitors across the BM site, conservators ensured any necessary environmental adjustments were made. Covid did offer unexpected opportunities. With the study rooms closed, and most changes to showcase displays on hold, collection care staff had more time to undertake improvements to the stores and clean objects on open display in the galleries.

Lockdown meant all laboratory facilities were closed. Scientists devoted their efforts to writing up and disseminating existing research for both academic and wider audiences. A newsletter explained how heritage science can reveal evidence of reuse, recycling and repair in the collection. Blog posts offered readers scientific insights into Hokusai's *The Great Wave* and ritual black liquids found on ancient Egyptian coffins. Recommissioning the laboratories in August was halted once more in December, pending their reopening in 2021.



Online access to research

A BM blog post introduced a study of 'black goo', the residue of a funerary covering applied to some Egyptian mummies, such as this one of Djedkhonsiufankh from 945–735 BC. (Length 176 cm)

Research publications

Collaborations with partners around the world included a study of Parthian Empire coins from the reign of Mithradates II (r.122/1–91 BC). This coin shows the king, with a seated archer on the reverse. (Diameter 3.2 cm)



The value of the research legacy of the BM's exhibitions and projects became evident as public programming was restricted. *Piranesi drawings: visions of antiquity*, supported by the Tavolozza Foundation, was due to be a six-month exhibition of the BM's 51 drawings by the 18th-century Italian artist, but was forced to close after only a few weeks. The printed catalogue will preserve the in-depth research and thinking that went into the show for audiences and scholars in the future. *Imagining the Divine*, published in February 2021, was the culmination of a five-year research collaboration with the University of Oxford, *Empires of Faith*, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The volume brought together scholars of the art and archaeology of late antiquity (AD 200–1000), across cultures and regions from India to Iberia, to discuss how objects can inform our understanding of religions. A six-year interdisciplinary study of the reign and wider influence of the Guptas in India (c.320–550), funded by the European Research Council, concluded in 2020. *Beyond Boundaries* brought a new understanding to the complex history of ideas about kingship and religion in South and Central Asia. The project generated a number of publications, including studies of ancient Indian texts, Buddhist monuments, and early kingdoms in Myanmar.

With reduced access to the material collection, research was interrupted on most projects. Some funding bodies were able to support a more protracted schedule. Others encouraged ongoing work where possible. Priority was given to support staff and students on time-limited projects. The latest group of PhD students, who study at the BM and a UK university as part of the Collaborative Doctoral Partnership scheme supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, are being mentored online during periods when the BM remains shut.

Research across the BM, when it resumed, included a study of the BM collection itself, looking not so much at individual objects or collectors, as the wider patterns of how, when and where objects came to be in the BM. A project documenting small Egyptian statuary, supported by David and Molly Lowell Borthwick, will ensure this significant collection is much more widely accessible internationally, with new photography and updated information.

Award-winning research included an article jointly produced by the BM and Australian National University. The prize, awarded by the journal *Australian Historical Studies*, praised the 'object biography' which explored the long history of exhibition and interpretation of an early Aboriginal shield in the BM thought to have been collected in the late 18th or early 19th century. The research partnership will continue with a new grant from the Australian Research Council to work with communities in New South Wales to explore other Aboriginal objects from early colonial Sydney.

Research publications included a study of coins from the reign of one of the great dynastic rulers of the Parthian Empire, Mithradates II. The volume was produced in partnership with colleagues in Iran, Austria, France, Germany and the USA. Collaborations with coin specialist Spink in London, with whom the BM also recently published an international reference work on the coinage of the Roman emperor Hadrian, included in 2021 a popular book marking the 50th anniversary of the decimalisation of Britain's currency.



The building

Wider work on the Museum continued. There were inevitable delays, but once secure measures were in place, the BM was able to make progress in a number of areas. Planned works for the south colonnade and pediment at the main entrance to the BM took place, with essential structural repairs to the roof timbers and replacement of copper sheets. Major improvements were also undertaken to BM buildings along Russell Square as well as to internal stores, departmental libraries and other spaces.

Construction of the British Museum Archaeological Research Collection (BM_ARC) was adversely affected, but advanced nonetheless. The new building in Berkshire, a collaboration with the University of Reading, will house significant collections of the BM. Zinc-covered cladding to the external walls and roof was completed as was the installation of the secondary steelwork inside. Ponds constructed around the building for surface-water drainage will create new seasonal habitats to support local biodiversity. Related developments included work on the new access road through the Thames Valley Science Park. The decant of the BM's research collection at Blythe House also progressed. The collections of archaeological assemblages, sculpture, mosaics and historic casts are being packed, ready for transport to the BM_ARC, with over 8,000 objects, including the Roman Vindolanda tablets, prepared for rehousing at the BM itself. The BM remains grateful for the generosity of the private donors supporting BM_ARC, including the Headley Trust, the Band Trust, Fidelity UK Foundation and Graham and Joanna Barker.

Welcoming in London

Conserving the BM itself

Repairs and maintenance to the south colonnade went ahead as planned. They included cleaning the pediment that greets visitors when they arrive at the BM's main entrance.

BM's newest facility

In the Berkshire countryside, the new British Museum Archaeological Research Collection is being built to house a number of research collections from the BM. The facility is a partnership with the University of Reading.



At the BM itself lockdown provided an interval to rethink some of the displays. New acquisitions were added to the gallery of 19th-century Europe to tell a more complex story of empire, slavery and the Abolition Movement. In a gallery documenting Roman encounters with the Greek world, statues were placed on taller plinths to create a dramatic display more in keeping with how they were intended to be viewed in antiquity. The Museum also began preparation for an exciting new project that will support the comprehensive redisplay of the collection in the years ahead. *Reimagining the British Museum* will create innovative approaches to placing global collaboration at the heart of the Museum's masterplan, and to the reinterpretation of the collection in conversation with partners around the world. Tested and evaluated through pilot projects in the form of temporary displays, digital and other public programmes, the project will aim to provide a narrative and methodological roadmap for the redisplay of the collection. As director Hartwig Fischer stated on BBC Radio 4's *Front Row*, we need to reflect on 'who tells the story, whose perspective comes into play, whose voice is being heard.' Rethinking the display of the permanent collection presents a huge opportunity to include more varied voices in the presentation of the stories which the Museum needs to tell for its audiences across the country and throughout the world.

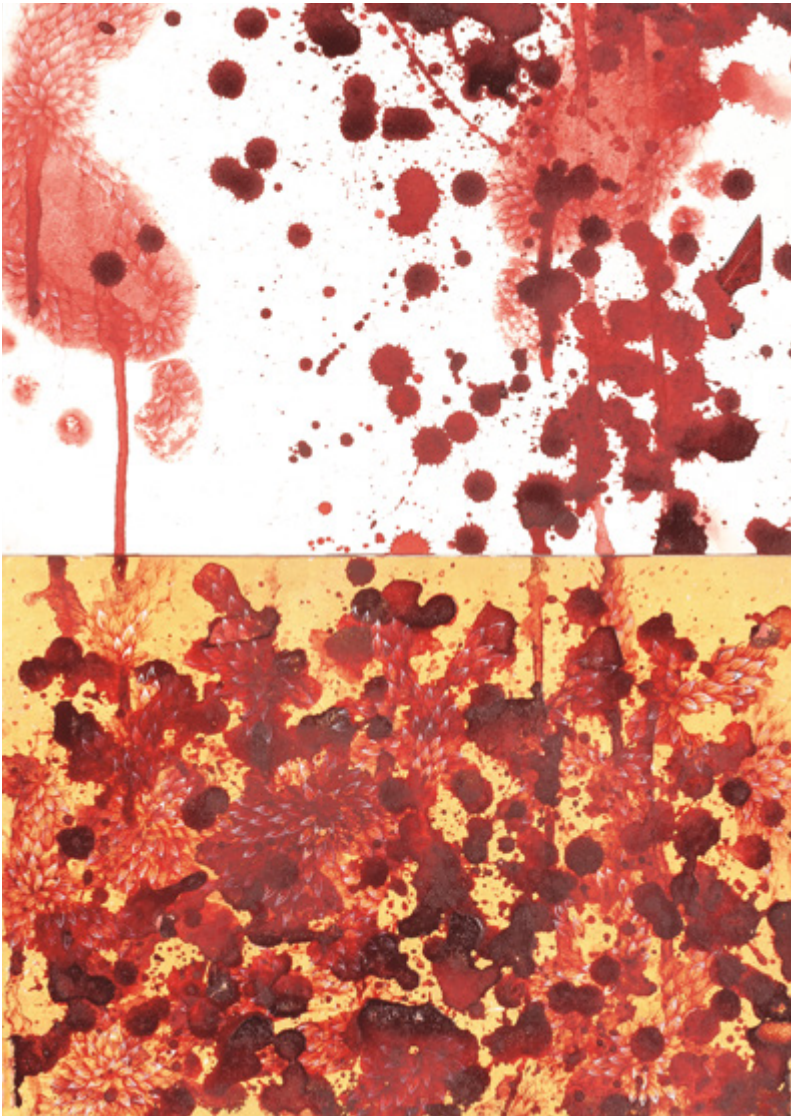
A competing array of histories makes museums such as the BM exciting places in the modern world, challenging how we think about the past as they encourage us to ponder other cultures and ways of being. Former Trustee Bonnie Greer followed her 2020 series of public debates, *The Era of Reclamation*, with some challenging reflections on the BM blog on identity, race, trauma and who decides what ownership is. In 2020, the BM updated its Collecting and Empire gallery trail, enabling interested visitors to explore how the BM, founded in 1753, has been shaped by imperial contact. Such activities online and at the Museum are features of an ever-changing programme at the BM to address essential topics for audiences today.

The BM in 2021 is a new institution. After one of the most challenging and remarkable years in its long history, the Museum reopens to visitors from across the UK and the world who have continued to engage with the BM digitally: its events and learning programmes, its scholarship and research, and its diverse collection that tells the stories of the world and its many cultures. Those digital formats will continue to carry the Museum out across the globe for audiences worldwide, just as the doors swing open to welcome everyone back in, to celebrate and enjoy the outstanding objects displayed in the galleries of the British Museum. Reopening will be a vital contribution to moving beyond the pandemic – to energise our lives and reinvigorate our shared experience of community.

Welcoming in London

Acquisitions

New acquisitions ensure the BM remains relevant to future generations. Many arise out of collaborations with partners around the world. Some, commissioned for exhibitions, give voice to local communities today. Others are topical projects to capture our present age, such as the worldwide Covid-19 collecting programme.



***This Leprous Brightness*, 2011**
This striking watercolour representing the vulnerability of the human body was made by Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi. The work is one of 147 prints and drawings which Hamish Parker donated to the BM through the Cultural Gifts Scheme of Arts Council England. The collection features modern and contemporary works from Britain, USA, Germany, Egypt, Pakistan, Japan and Argentina.

Watercolour and gold leaf on wasli paper
42 x 30 cm



***Atigiit, Silapaat*, 2019–20**
This floating display of thin Inuit garments is made from sheets of block-printed Japanese paper sewn together. The installation comments on climate change, and was commissioned for the Citi exhibition *Arctic: culture and climate*, with support from the Onaway Trust, PF Charitable Trust and High Commission of Canada in the UK. The artwork was made collaboratively in Canada by young artists from Kinngait and Pangnirtung, Nunavut, as part of the ongoing collective Kinngarni Katujjiqatgiit and Embassy of Imagination (2014–20).

Washi paper printed with designs of found objects and materials from Nunavut



Model of the *yhyakh* festival, 2020
In northeastern Siberia, the Sakha mark the summer solstice with a great festival. The BM commissioned Sakha artist Fedor Markov to create a contemporary depiction of the *yhyakh* (detail shown). He based his work on a 19th-century model of the festival in the BM collection.

Mammoth ivory and wood
17 x 78 x 42 cm



Collecting Covid-19
To create a record of Covid-19, the BM gathered objects to show future generations how people across the globe responded to the crisis. The collection includes protective masks, posters, stamps and badges. All hold specific cultural references: a local cloth, a famous image, a political message. Even BM objects such as the Rosetta Stone were reproduced. Alumni of the BM's International Training Programme and colleagues around the world contributed ideas to build a truly global portrait of the pandemic. Acquisitions included this South African mask made from traditional *shweshwe* fabric.

Cotton
Height 10 cm



Fumei Chōja and the nine-tailed spirit fox, 1829
In 1829, Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai made 103 finely detailed brush-drawings for a proposed publication, *The Great Picture Book of Everything*. Fumei Chōja is a character in *kabuki* and *bunraku* plays, which also feature the shape-shifting nine-tailed fox and its adventures in India, China and Japan. The BM was able to purchase this recently rediscovered set of drawings with support from the Theresia Gerda Buch Bequest, in memory of her parents Rudolph and Julie Buch, with a contribution from Art Fund.

Ink on paper
11 x 15 cm



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Future exhibitions

Engaging audiences both in the UK and abroad, planned exhibitions for 2021/22 include *Thomas Becket: murder and the making of a saint* – supported by the Hintze Family Charitable Foundation, the Ruddock Foundation for the Arts, and Jack Ryan and Zemen Paulos. The displays tell the story of Becket's tumultuous journey from royal confidant to archbishop and, to some, traitor. *Nero: the man behind the myth* will question the traditional view of the maligned Roman emperor. The exhibition *Reflections: contemporary art of the Middle East and North Africa*, supported by the BM's Contemporary and Modern Middle Eastern Art acquisitions group (CaMMEA), will feature 100 recent works on paper.



Thomas Becket
Loans to the BM exhibition marking the life and later reputation of Thomas Becket include a medieval stained-glass window from Canterbury Cathedral and this gilded reliquary casket from Hedalen Stave Church, never before seen outside Norway.

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