Desire, love, identity: exploring LGBTQ histories
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This booklet contains a full transcript of the audio tour that accompanies the Desire, love, identity: exploring LGBTQ histories trail. The audio tour consists of a short introduction and commentaries for 15 objects on display in the British Museum. A trail leaflet and a map of the Museum are available on the Museum’s website to help you find the objects.
Hello and welcome to the British Museum. I am Fiona Shaw and you’ll also be hearing from fellow actor Simon Russell Beale.

Same-sex love and desire, and gender diversity, have always been an integral part of human experience, but the way that they have been expressed culturally has varied widely across the world and across time.

Museums have often provided a safe space where people from different social classes and backgrounds could mingle and meet. The novelist E.M. Forster used the British Museum’s classical galleries as the setting for an important scene in his novel *Maurice*. The novel tells the story of the growing self-awareness of a Cambridge graduate who finds love with a gamekeeper. It is in the Museum’s classical galleries that sexual attraction
between the two men develops into romance and an enduring relationship.

Among the some eight million objects in the British Museum's collection are many that can help to tell the long and varied story of same-sex human love and desire and gender identity across cultures. In this tour we'll introduce you to 15 of them. It has been inspired by Professor Richard Parkinson's recent book, *A Little Gay History – Desire and Diversity Across the World*.

'I think it is very important for institutions such as the British Museum to include LGBTQ histories in its view of the world. I think it is incredibly important that people of all genders and sexualities feel that they are part of world history. And politically, of course, it is very important as well. I remember growing up as a young gay man in the north how limited the stereotypes were coming from the media. And when you look across world history you see so many different
ways of being LGBTQ – across different periods, across different cultures. We really are absolutely integral parts of all the histories in the world.’

Of course not all LGBTQ perspectives are represented equally within the Museum’s collection. This largely reflects what was made in the past and what has survived. It is also partly a result of what has been collected by the Museum and where from, as well as how it has been catalogued. It’s always going to be a partial story, and male experiences and viewpoints predominate.

Lesbian, gay, bi, trans and queer are comparatively recent labels. Ancient societies and other cultures had attitudes and words that are often very different to our own today. Within the individual commentaries we’ve carefully used the words that we feel are most appropriate and accurate for that specific object, culture or context.
Sponsor’s statement

If you look at all of the objects during a single visit to the museum – or complete the trail online – it will probably take you about an hour. The tour involves a fair bit of walking and you’ll probably find it helpful to have a copy of the Museum’s map with you to help you navigate. The objects are indicated with a small orange card or sticker marked with the Desire, love, identity logo. We have selected objects that should be quite easy to identify, but if you need assistance please ask a member of staff.

You don’t have to follow the objects in any particular order, but you might like to begin in Room 1, the Enlightenment Gallery with the Roman statue of a discus thrower.

We hope you enjoy the tour…
1. Room 1: Enlightenment

The Discus Thrower, 2nd century AD

This magnificent marble statue of a discus thrower, *discobolus* in Latin, is one of the most familiar and popular ancient Roman sculptures in the British Museum. It was made in the 2nd century AD and is a Roman copy of a much earlier Greek sculpture that no longer survives. It was found at Tivoli in the villa of the emperor Hadrian, whom we’ll meet elsewhere on the tour.

The Romans greatly admired the culture of ancient Greece and it exerted a powerful influence over their own. Ancient Greek artists often depicted their gods, heroes and men nude. A beautiful body was regarded as a sign of virtue and excellent moral condition. This was something new in the ancient world, where adult nakedness had often been associated with the defeated, enslaved or humiliated.
This sculpture is often assumed to be an athlete, but there is another possibility. Rather than being a single figure, as we view it today, the discus thrower may have been part of a larger group of statuary with a mythological theme. The beautiful youth Hyacinth was tragically struck and killed by a discus thrown by his lover, the god Apollo. As in this version from *Metamorphoses* by Ovid:

‘Noon, and the sun was midway between dawn and night. They stripped the clothes from their bodies and shone with the oil of the rich olive. Then began the competitions, throwing the broad discus. First Apollo sent it, well-balanced into the high heavens, cutting through the clouds with its heft. The heavy disk fell after a long while, back to solid earth, proving skill combined with strength. Straight away, unthinking and driven by a desire
for sport,
Hyacinth, the Spartan youth, rushed to grab the disc.
But the hard earth threw it back up,
with a rebound, like a whip in his face.
The god turned as pale as the boy himself,
and cradling his collapsed limbs tried to revive him,
now tending to his dreadful wound,
now restoring his departing spirit by applying herbs.
These skills are useless; the wound was beyond all cure’.

In one version of the myth, it is the god of the West Wind, Zephyr, who blows Apollo’s fatal discus towards Hyacinth, jealous that the beautiful youth preferred Apollo. Sexual desire and love between men was an accepted part of life in ancient Greece and Rome, within certain boundaries. In Greek mythology, although the gods were immortal with divine powers, they experienced the same passions and desires as the
people whose lives they governed.

The Discus Thrower stands in the oldest surviving part of the British Museum. The current displays recall the Museum as it once was during the Age of Enlightenment. In this period museums provided one of the few places where members of the public could openly and respectably gaze at paintings or sculptures of naked bodies. One male 19th-century museum visitor wrote that:

‘I revelled in the sight of pictures and statues of male form and could not keep from kissing them’.

The next object we’ll examine is a carved treasure box. It’s in a case to the right of the Discus Thrower and about halfway to the end of the gallery.
2. Room 1: Enlightenment

Maori treasure box, New Zealand/Aotearoa

Thousands of people have probably walked past this rectangular object from New Zealand without ever even noticing it and its quite startling sexual imagery. But it really is worth taking some time for a closer look at this intricately carved box made from wood inlaid with shell and greenstone.

Maori people of high status kept treasure boxes containing prized possessions, such as greenstone ornaments and feathers to wear in their hair. This example was designed to be suspended, not stored on the ground, and so these striking images are best seen at eye level. The boxes and their contents were passed down through families or exchanged as important gifts between chiefs.

Every surface of this box has been covered
with intricately carved male and female figures intertwined in various types of sexual union. Maori carvings often include representations of sexual intercourse, as an evocation of fertility and the continuity of life, but this example is unusual. The face at the centre of the front panel is shown with a stylised penis in its mouth, while its tongue reaches out to what appears to be the vagina of the female figure next to it.

The blurring of sexual boundaries and gendered roles is rarely shown on objects from the Pacific, but in the late 1700s early European explorers did record sexual practices between males in the eastern Pacific region. European missionaries and colonial officials in the following centuries strongly discouraged such activities.

Today in parts of modern Polynesia, non-Western models of gender identity remain an accepted part of life. In Samoa, for example, there is a recognised third gender known as \textit{fa'aafafine}, which translates
as ‘in the manner of a woman’. **Fa’afafine** are born biologically male but identify as and are raised as female. Annual national **fa’afafine** beauty pageants are popular events.

The person who originally owned or made this artefact is unknown to us. And we can only guess its significance to those who owned it before it came into the Museum’s collection.
3. Room 1: Enlightenment

Statue of Ganymede, 2nd century AD

This Roman sculpture, almost 2,000 years old, shows the gorgeous Trojan youth Ganymede, naked except for a cap and a shawl draped over one shoulder, leaning on a tree stump, looking up towards an eagle. In mythology Jupiter (or Jove), overcome with lust, took the form of an eagle and abducted Ganymede to satisfy his desire.

The Roman poet Ovid wrote:

‘The King of the gods once burned with love
For Ganymede, and so something was devised
Since Jove wanted to seem to be something other than what he was.
Yet he deigned to transform into no bird but one
Which could carry his thunderbolts.
Straight away he pierced the air with his lying wings
And snatched away the Trojan boy; who even now, Mixes the drinks, and though Juno is unwilling, pours out nectar for Jove’.

Ganymede became the god’s cupbearer, something the god’s wife Juno resented. in ancient Greek art beautiful youths are frequently shown serving wine to male guests at drinking parties, or symposia.

In Greek mythology the gods were subject to the same desires as humans. Zeus (Jupiter to the Romans) in particular took on various forms in order to satisfy his lust for both men and women. Ancient Greece exerted a heavy influence over Rome, including an acceptance of sexual relationships between men, within certain boundaries.

The adoption of Christianity within the Roman Empire – and its subsequent dominance – resulted in a significant change in attitudes.
During the medieval period – and beyond - the name Ganymede was sometimes used as a term of abuse. The Museum has a print depicting Samuel Drybutter bearing the caption Ganymede and dating from 1771. Drybutter was a London bookseller and jeweller who repeatedly escaped being convicted for ‘sodomy’. In 1777 he was beaten to death by a mob.

Medieval images of Ganymede tend to show him fully clothed and looking rather unhappy at his abduction, unlike this celebratory statue. The Renaissance (from around 1400 to 1600) led to a renewed interest in classical mythology, including erotically charged subjects that offered a legitimate way to depict sexual stories that otherwise would have been forbidden.

Statues such as this one were popular with wealthy European collectors during the 1700s and 1800s, the Age of Enlightenment. As pieces of classical art from antiquity, they made the subject
of male same-sex desire culturally acceptable. Displays of classical statues in public museums offered a rare opportunity for people to gaze respectably at representations of the naked human body. Classical art and literature celebrating same-sex relationships provided inspiration to people living in Europe during later eras when homosexuality was criminalised.

When you’ve finished looking around this gallery, go out of the double doors near Ganymede to find a tall Mayan stela.
4. Room 1: East Stairs, Ground Floor (between Room 1 and Room 27)

Maya stela. Cast of Stela H, from the Great Plaza, Copan, Honduras, 1881–94, copied from an AD 730 original

Objects from other cultures were sometimes misinterpreted when first encountered by European explorers and scholars, like this towering stela. Sometimes these misunderstandings left an enduring legacy as they were documented in registers as ‘facts’ that were subsequently repeated unthinkingly.

This enormous plaster cast was taken from a Maya stela from the Great Plaza at Copan in Honduras at some point between 1881 and 1894. The original was carved in AD 730.

The figure depicted on this monument is wearing a netted jade skirt, usually worn by elite women
in Maya imagery, and early researchers therefore assumed this figure was a royal Maya woman. But from the inscriptions, and a better understanding of Maya myths, the figure has now been identified as the male ruler Waxaklajuun Ub’aah K’awiil.

He is dressed as the youthful maize god, a divine hermaphrodite (combining both male and female genders) connected to agricultural fertility, renewal of life and creation. This gender duality may reflect his power as a ruler, both in his duty to perform successful fertility rituals to nurture his people, and in his ability to communicate with divine beings. (And this blurring of genders in the shape of a corncob is surprisingly common in Meso America.)

When gender is being read cross-culturally, there is always scope for confusion or misunderstandings. There are many instances of European explorers, researchers and collectors initially being unable, or perhaps unwilling, to make
sense of values that differed from their own.

Our next stop is in Room 25. You can get there by going through Room 27, the Mexico gallery, and then through Room 26, which is North America. When you reach Room 24, look for the stairs down on either side of Hoa Hakananai’a from Easter Island / Rapa Nui.
5. Room 25: Africa

N’domo initiation mask, Mali, early 20th century

These galleries provide an insight into aspects of the cultural life of Africa, past and present. They include artefacts drawn from the entire continent and many historic periods. Here we are focusing on masquerade, an art of transformation. Masquerades often occur at rites of passage, such as initiation. They often maintain and express the secret knowledge of insider groups and only certain persons may be permitted to see them. With a few exceptions, the actual performing is a male activity, and masks representing women (for example) are worn by men.

This mask, made by Bamana people from Mali in the early 20th century, was used in N’domo (or Ntomo) society ceremonies associated with the progression of young boys into adulthood.
Children are believed to be born androgynous. It is only when these ceremonies and rituals are complete that boys can attain their full male status.

The N’domo society masks are used in dance performances during initiation ceremonies. The number of horns indicating male (three or six) or female (four or eight) gender or androgyny (two, five or seven) horns.

Anthropological and historical evidence shows that a variety of gender configurations (and same-sex practices) were known in Africa before the arrival of Europeans. These practices and beliefs were often prohibited by colonial administrators from the 19th century onwards, and have sometimes been forgotten, creating the impression that they never existed. Partly as a result of this history – and the introduction of Christianity – ‘homosexuality’ was made illegal in many African countries.
According to the United Nations over 70 countries around the globe still have discriminatory laws that criminalise private, consensual same-sex relationships, exposing millions of individuals to the risk of arrest, prosecution and imprisonment. Approximately 30 of these countries are African. In many instances, these laws are a legacy of colonial rule. Most of the laws used to punish gay men in Africa, the Caribbean and in other former colonies were in fact written in Victorian London.

In 2012 South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu commented:

‘I have no doubt in the future, the laws that criminalise so many forms of love and human commitment will look the way apartheid laws do to us now – so obviously wrong’.

We’ll continue exploring on the third floor of the Museum. You can retrace your steps back through North America and Mexico to take the staircase
near the Mayan stela we saw earlier. If you’re following the tracks in order, we’ll meet you in Room 56 to look at two objects there.
6. Room 56: Mesopotamia

Queen of the Night, 1800–1700 BC

This very striking, baked clay panel is almost 4,000 years old. It shows a nude female figure wearing a headdress usually associated with Mesopotamian deities. She has the wings and talons of a bird of prey and holds a rod and ring of justice, symbols of her divinity. Research suggests she may be an embodiment of Ishtar, a goddess of sexual attraction and war. Ishtar had the power to ‘change a man into woman and woman into man’.

Ishtar was at the centre of a cult in ancient Mesopotamia, whose followers included a group of men called kurgarrus. In one epic poem they are described as people:

‘Whose masculinity Ishtar has turned into femininity to make the people reverend,
The carriers of dagger, razor, scalpel and flint
blades,  
Who regularly do [forbidden things] to delight the heart of Ishtar’.

Although their gender identity was regarded as in some way irregular, they were nevertheless still part of a divinely ordained world order of Mesopotamian state religion. Gender roles can vary widely between different societies and cultures. In some, for example, a third sex is recognised, along with an acceptance of diversity or fluidity.

Ishtar was believed to have the power to change or assign gender. There are numerous examples of gods and goddesses in other cultures who challenge the idea that gender is fixed, or who combine gender attributes. The Mesoamerican Maya ruler who we meet elsewhere on this tour, is dressed as the youthful maize god, who combines both male and female aspects. In Hindu mythology gender is often fluid, with the divine transcending
any rigid mortal categories of male and female. This is reflected, for example, in a statue of a dancing Shiva in the Museum which depicts the god with two differently shaped earrings, one masculine in style, the other feminine. You can see the figure of Shiva in the middle of the South Asia displays in Room 33.

Ishtar is a fascinating deity who collapses boundaries and celebrates the ambiguous territory between genders. She says in one text:

‘Though I am a woman I am a noble young man
When I take my stand at the rear of battle, in truth
I am the woman who comes and draws near,
When I sit in the ale-house, I am a woman (but
truly I am an exuberant man).
When I am present at the place of quarreling, in
truth I am a woman, a perfect pillar.
When I sit by the door of the tavern, truly I am a
prostitute who knows the penis.
The friend of a man, the girlfriend of a woman’.
7. Room 55: Mesopotamia


It is often impossible to know for certain how to read objects or texts from the distant past or from other cultures. Even when we have a written record, there are often several possibilities when it comes to interpreting the language used. Sometimes objects in the Museum’s collection pose questions, rather than offering definitive insights into LGBTQ histories.

This gallery focuses on the Mesopotamian civilisations of Babylonia and Assyria which flourished during the 1st millennium BC. Mesopotamia’s highly developed literature and learning are reflected in clay tablets from the library of the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, northern Iraq, written in cuneiform script. Some of the tablets from this library now in the
British Museum’s collection record part of the **Epic of Gilgamesh**, a famous poem sometimes regarded as the earliest surviving great work of world literature. It predates the *Iliad* by more than a thousand years and, at its heart, is the story of the love between two men.

**The Epic of Gilgamesh** tells the story of a semi-historical king and exists in different versions. The poem tells us about a relationship between King Gilgamesh and a wild man called Enkidu. Before they meet, Gilgamesh has a dream that is interpreted to mean:

‘A strong partner will come to you,  
One who can save the life of a friend…  
You will love him as a wife, you will dote on him’.

The two virile men have various heroic adventures, including killing a demon called Huwawa. The small clay object that we are focused on here represents the face of Huwawa as if formed by
the intestines of a sheep examined for divination, the use of omens to predict the future. Later in the Epic, a key moment occurs when Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the Bull of Heaven which the goddess Ishtar has sent to punish Gilgamesh for rejecting her advances. A small carved cylinder in the Museum’s collection – used to seal clay documents – shows the killing of the Bull while Ishtar tries to stop the two men. The god demands punishment and Enkidu dies. Gilgamesh spends the rest of the poem grieving for his ‘friend whom I love so much, who experienced every hardship with me’.

These words imply a sincere closeness in the relationship between the two men. Such intimacy does not necessarily involve sexual desire, but some historians have debated whether the text could be understood sexually:

‘my beloved friend is dead, he is dead, my beloved brother is dead, I will mourn
as long as I breathe, I will sob for him
like a woman who has lost her only child.
...
Then he veiled Enkidu’s face like a bride’s’.

Does the poem celebrate a ‘homosexual’
relationship, or a ‘homosocial’ one, a close non-
sexual friendship between the men? While there
is no clear sexual encounter between Gilgamesh
and Enkidu in the texts, the relationship is
described in erotic terms and theirs is a story of
profound and powerful love.
8. Room 61: Ancient Egypt

Stela of Hor and Suty, about 1375 BC

It is difficult to look back at the distant past – into ancient cultures very different to our own – and to find definitive insights into personal and individual realities of love and desire.

Written evidence tells us that the ancient Egyptians recognised the existence of same-sex desire. One narrative poem, for example, refers to a scandal caused by an affair between King Pepy II and his general:

‘The courtier Hent’s son Tjeti stood, thinking: “So this is it! What was said is true – the king goes out at night”. Hent’s son Tjeti went, just behind this godking –
without letting his heart misgive him – to see all that he did.
The king arrived at the house of General Sasenet. Then he threw a brick, and kicked the wall, so that a ladder was let down for him. Then he ascended, while Hent’s son Tjeti waited until his Majesty came back. Now after his Majesty had done what he desired with General Sasenet he returned to his palace, and Tjeti followed him’.

Most of the references that have survived are at best slightly negative and all represent society as seen by the elite.

Richard Parkinson, who wrote A Little Gay History:

‘All of the evidence we have suggests that
Egyptian society was very heteronormative. The standard social group is an elite male office holder, his wife and then the son who will succeed him. But in literary texts, which are fictional, we get accounts of more diverse experiences. We have adultery, and we also have possibly the first recorded chat-up line in human history, which is between two male deities. In one myth the god Seth tries to seduce Horus with the line … ‘what a lovely backside you have’ and it is clear that the god is driven by desire, not by the aim of simply humiliating his younger rival.

The damaged funerary inscription on this stela is dedicated to two officials Hor and Suty, who were architects on the temple of Amun at Luxor.

One scholar has suggested that Hor and Suty were a male couple and that the inscription was deliberately damaged after their deaths by their outraged wives and children. In the inscription here the men refer to one another as:
'My brother, like myself, whose ways pleased me, 
For he had come from the womb 
With me on the same day'.

This is usually interpreted as meaning that Hor and Suty were twins, a view that is almost universally accepted by academics. An earlier Old Kingdom tomb at Saqqara from about 2450 BC is also dedicated to two men, the courtiers Ni-ankh-khnum and Khnum-hotep. Scenes of the two men embracing have been considered by some historians to be the ‘first recorded gay kiss’. But as is the case here, the two men are also almost certainly twins. Personal experiences for the vast majority of people in ancient societies went unrecorded and are lost to us. Collectively they form what the English novelist E. M. Forster described as ‘a great unrecorded history’.
9. Room 70: Ancient Rome

The Warren Cup, about AD 10

There are other Roman silver cups in the British Museum, and other museum collections around the world, but this one is unique. What makes it exceptional is its decoration. The bowl of the cup is decorated with two scenes of a man and a youth having sex. The detailed relief scenes are depicted with great naturalism, requiring extraordinary skill on the part of the maker.

On one side, a younger male lowers himself down onto the lap of his older, bearded partner who wears a wreath in his hair. To the right a young boy, perhaps a servant, peers in towards them through a partially opened door. On the other side, two young males are engaged in sex. The rooms are well appointed with drapery – the musical instruments suggest a sophisticated and leisured setting.
The same-sex scenes on the Warren Cup reflect a Roman representation of the Greek past, where a mature male lover (erastes) would often form a relationship with a younger man (eromenos). Although male same-sex relationships were also an accepted part of life in the Roman world, this more formalised Greek type of relationship did not exist. A Roman man was free to choose sexual partners of either gender. Male same-sex relationships were not unusual. But for Romans it was important that men were dominant both socially and sexually.

The Warren cup is a luxury drinking vessel that belongs to the sphere of elite dining and entertaining some 2,000 years ago. Wine accompanied the meal throughout and we can only imagine the atmosphere of such an occasion. The cup holds a fair slug of wine! Silver cups like this were intended to display the wealth, status and culture of their owners to their guests. It is easy to imagine the diners – both men and women
– reclining on their couches with splendid cups like this gleaming in the lamplight and providing a conversation starter, allowing the hosts to demonstrate their knowledge and taste. Similar scenes of male lovemaking survive on other tablewares made in cameo glass for the wealthy or much cheaper mass-produced ceramics for the less well-off.

This exquisite cup made in AD 10 is said to have been found at Bittir, close to Jerusalem, in the early 20th century. It seems likely that the cup was hidden during a period of unrest and never reclaimed by its owner. If the cup had not been hidden at a later date it would probably have been melted down and the silver reused. It was bought by the American art collector Edward Perry Warren, who lived in the south of England at Lewes.

In the decades after Warren’s death, at a time when homosexuality was still illegal in the UK,
it was impossible to find a buyer for the cup. In 1953 the cup was sent to New York in an attempt to sell it there, but it was refused entry by US Customs and sent back to England. Shortly afterwards it was offered to the British Museum who declined the chance to purchase it.

Fortunately, in 1999 the British Museum took up a second opportunity to acquire the Warren Cup, then the most expensive acquisition it had made, and it has been on public display ever since.
10. Room 70: Ancient Rome

Marble bust of Hadrian, about AD 117–18,
Marble head of Antinous, after AD 130

In Room 70, celebrating Ancient Rome, we find two marble sculptures: a bust of the Emperor Hadrian and a head depicting the beautiful Antinous.

Roman concepts of sexuality were very different from those of modern, western societies. There is no word in Latin for the modern term ‘homosexuality’ and a Roman man was free to choose sexual partners of either gender, but he was expected to get married and establish a family. The idea that men should be dominant socially and sexually was central. As long as a man remained the active partner in sexual encounters his masculinity was not questioned. Although a concept of sexual transgression did exist, it encompassed sexual relationships
between adult male citizens or relationships with other citizens’ wives, which were considered socially unacceptable.

The two sculptures displayed here are not a pair and would not originally have been displayed together. The bust of the bearded man is the emperor Hadrian whose reign was marked by military campaigns and building projects, including the famous wall across the north of England built in AD 122. The beautiful, clean-shaven youth alongside Hadrian is Antinous.

The emperor was in his late 40s when he met Antinous, a Greek youth from Bithynia, now in modern Turkey. Antinous became the emperor’s lover. But this was much more than just a sexual relationship. They seem to have been inseparable. Hadrian was accompanied by his lover at royal ceremonies and Imperial tours. Roman society didn’t oppose this, but objected more to his inability to produce a male heir with his wife.
During an imperial tour of Egypt together in AD 130, Antinous drowned in the Nile. Nobody knows exactly how, but Hadrian’s outpouring of grief was unprecedented. According to one famous later description:

‘When he was sailing on the Nile he lost his Antinous, for whom he wept like a woman’.

Hadrian founded a city named Antinoopolis at the place where his lover died and made him into a god, an honour usually reserved for the emperor’s family. The emperor publicly commemorated Antinous in statues, portraits and coins across the Roman empire, an almost unparalleled public memorial to a lost love.

Richard Parkinson, author of A Little Gay History:

‘When we look at ancient cultures from outside it is all too easy to analyse them in terms of norms, of social conventions, of established practices and
to forget the individual experience.

When we think of Rome, same-sex activity between men was structured by age and by patterns of power and dominance. If we concentrate only on that though, we forget the individual experience of passion and of love.

Hadrian had sex with the young Antinous. It was not an equal power relationship. But when we look at all the statues and the images of the beautiful Antinous we perhaps catch an echo of the emperor’s feelings. To commemorate Antinous he composed the last great inscription in Egyptian hieroglyphs. It is an obelisk commemorating the setting up of the cult of Antinous as an Egyptian deity. It is very formal. It is very grandiose. But occasionally odd phrases hint at the feelings that underlay it. One wonderfully evocative phrase is the mention of Antinous as a beautiful youth with festival eyes’.
11. Room 69: Ancient Greece

Athenian wine cup and amphora
Wine cup, about 485–480 BC
Amphora, about 540 BC

These vessels, a wine cup and amphora (or vase), were made in Athens over 2,500 years ago. They would have been used at all-male drinking parties known as symposia. The exterior of the wine cup illustrates a symposium scene. Men recline on garlanded couches and are served wine by naked youths. The shape and size of the cup encouraged large gulps of wine. In this all-male gathering the atmosphere could become charged with desire and the possibility of sex.

The amphora, a vessel for holding wine, is decorated with a scene of aroused men courting younger, naked athletes and having sex between their thighs. The bearded men carry animals as gifts. Like the wine cup, the vase was made in
Athens but exported to the Etruscan city of Vulci in Italy, where it was found.

When the amphora came to the British Museum it was considered unsuitable for display, and was added to a collection of restricted material known as the Museum Secretum (or Secret Museum). Over 1,000 objects were kept here that were considered too shocking for public display. The Secret Museum operated from at least the 1830s until the 1950s, when it ceased to actively function. It no longer exists.

Close, intimate relationships between men and youths were culturally approved in some city-states in ancient Greece. Sexual relationships between males were most famously celebrated in Athens between the 6th and 4th centuries BC. These relationships were supposed to follow accepted boundaries and were normally structured by age.
The all-male world depicted here is reflected in Plato’s *Symposium*, written around 380 BC in the form of a dialogue between men on the nature of love. One Athenian aristocrat speaks:

‘There can be no greater benefit for a youth than to have a lover from his earliest youth, nor for a lover to have a worthy object for his affection… If then one could contrive that a state or an army should consist entirely of lovers and loved, it would be impossible for it to have a better organisation… a handful of such men, fighting side by side, would defeat practically the whole world’.

Ancient Greek and Roman attitudes to sex and sexuality were in many ways very different to the modern era. People were sexually active – and girls married – at an earlier age. Although sexual relationships between males were accepted within certain boundaries, the modern term homosexual had no Greek or Latin equivalent.
In ancient Greece women were generally excluded from public life and politics. Respectable women would not attend symposia but they did take part in domestic and religious rituals.

Classical art and literature celebrating same-sex relationships, objects like these, must have provided inspiration for people living in later eras when homosexuality was criminalised or heavily censured.
12. Room 69a: Greek and Roman life

Sappho: the lesbian poet
Water jar, around 450 BC, from Kimissalla, Rhodes

Evidence of actual female experiences and sexuality is difficult to find in ancient Greek and Roman objects. Classical art predominantly reflects male perspectives. Erotic acts between women were taboo in ancient Greece. They were rarely depicted or discussed - because they challenged male ideas about status, gender and sexuality. Intimate or sexualised images of women together in Greek art tend to pose questions, rather than offer definitive insights into genuine experiences. Yet women’s lives and loves were surely more varied than the objects in this room and the male-dominated sources tell us.

This ancient Greek water jar, from Rhodes around 450 BC, has been painted with four
female figures, red against a black background. These show a seated woman and three female attendants. The woman in the chair bends forward and is looking at an open scroll. If you look closely you'll be able to see dots that represent sixteen lines of writing. The other three women look towards her. Who is she? This same scene is depicted on another jar, now in a museum in Athens. There the seated figure has been inscribed in Greek characters with Sappho’s name. This makes it likely that the woman depicted on the British Museum’s vase is Sappho, the Greek poet. There are countless images of Sappho in the British Museum’s collection but, this is one of the earliest.

Sappho’s name has resonated throughout history, but given her fame, surprisingly little is known for certain about her life. Sappho is said to have lived around 630–570 BC in the town of Mytilene on the isle of Lesbos, in the eastern Aegean Sea.
She was famed for her poetry in antiquity. And through her poetry, in a society that was otherwise dominated by men, she gave a voice to female love and desire – writing love poems to both men and women. Plato called her the tenth muse. Her poems only survive as tantalising fragments,

‘For as I look on you,
My voice yields up no sound,
My tongue silently shivers,
My skin turns hot with fire,
My eyes give me no sight,
My ears pound their own sound,
A sweat chills over me,
A trembling seizes me,
I’m paler than the reeds,
And in my weakened state,
I’m little short of death’.

The emphasis on female intimacy in her poetry has contributed to the widely held idea that Sappho was a lesbian, but history has given us
many different Sapphos. During the Renaissance she was used as a symbol of classical erudition or learning. In the 19th century she was often depicted with a sexual allure intended to appeal to men. By the late 19th century her poetry had made the word for an inhabitant of Lesbos into a word for a woman who loves women. The historical Sappho remains enigmatic and elusive. But the brilliance of Sappho’s poetry and its expression of female love and desire continue to inspire readers over two and half thousand years after her death.

As she herself wrote prophetically:

‘I declare
That later on,
Even in an age unlike our own,
Someone will remember who we are’.

To find Saint Sebastian, go through Room 68 and continue across the cafe area into Room 40.
He’ll be along the right-hand wall as you enter this way. If you find yourself amidst many clocks and watches, you might have gone into Room 38 instead.
13. Room 40: Medieval Europe

St Sebastian, woodblock print, 1470–75 (this impression about 1820–40)

Saint Sebastian is believed to have been martyred around AD 288, during a period of Roman persecution of Christians. This print (and woodblock) shows him tied to a tree, his body pierced by five arrows, with archers standing on either side. Although he recovered from this particular ordeal, he was subsequently clubbed to death and his body thrown in a sewer. Not surprisingly perhaps, artists preferred to depict him tree-bound, usually stripped of armour and shot with arrows as in this 19th-century print taken from this 15th-century woodblock.

From the 15th century onwards St Sebastian was increasingly and frequently depicted as a paragon of male beauty with a toned body, often oblivious to the pain caused by his martyrdom. St Sebastian
was the patron saint of plague victims. His idealised, nearly nude, healthy body emphasised his role as protector against the plague, resisting the effects of pestilence symbolised by the arrows.

The Italian artist and writer Giorgio Vasari recorded that images of Saint Sebastian provoked inappropriate thoughts and feelings amongst female churchgoers, but he could equally have said the same of men. In more recent times, St Sebastian has become a gay icon.

The playwright Oscar Wilde owned a Guido Reni painting of Saint Sebastian and described him as ‘a lovely brown boy with crisp, clustering hair and red lips’. Wilde adopted Sebastian as his first name when he went into exile following his release from Reading jail, where he had served a sentence after a conviction for ‘gross indecency’.

St Sebastian features in Yukio Mishima’s novel,
Confessions of a Mask (1949). For Mishima, St Sebastian’s martyrdom symbolised the erotic pleasure of pain. In Confessions of a Mask, the main character – a lightly disguised author – is aroused by a reproduction of a painting of Sebastian. More recently St Sebastian inspired Derek Jarman’s film Sebastiane (1976) which explored the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

The now famous imagery of the saint – stripped, tied and shot with arrows – that Wilde, Mishima, Jarman and many others have responded to, developed during the later medieval period and the Renaissance. More recently the saint has even appeared on the front cover of a gay magazine. So now it’s perhaps difficult to see this tragic image without also considering his transformation into something of a tormented pin-up.
The Ladies of Llangollen: chocolate cups and saucers, 1780–81 and 1790

There is nothing particularly striking about this pair of 18th-century, porcelain, chocolate cups – each with a lid and two handles – and their saucers. They’re certainly not the most impressive or eye-catching objects in this room. What is extraordinary are the two remarkable women who once owned them, Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, known popularly as the Ladies of Llangollen.

Monday, October 4th, 1784

‘Cold Wett day. Staid in our library the Entire day. Reading – writing, and sharing a delicious day’.

The cups are decorated with a view of a house on one side and their entwined heraldic emblems in
lozenges on the other. The centre of each saucer is decorated with a monogram.

Both Sarah and Eleanor’s families lived in Ireland and it was here that the two women formed a strong emotional bond and attachment that would endure for the rest of their lives. Eleanor was sixteen years older than Sarah. In 1778, when Sarah was 23 and Eleanor 39, the two women secretly fled together, crossing the Irish Sea to set up home in North Wales, leaving their old lives behind them. It is their new home near Llangollen that is depicted on the cups.

Eleanor’s voluminous diary gives us an insight into their domestic idyll. She writes on Thursday, September 22, 1785:

‘Up at Seven. Dark Morning, all the Mountains enveloped in mist. Thick Rain. A fire in the Library, delightfully comfortable, Breakfasted at half past Eight. From nine ‘till one writing. My Beloved
drawing Pembroke Castle – from one to three
read to her – after dinner Went hastily around
the gardens. Rain’d without interruption the entire
day – from Four ‘till Ten reading to my Sally – She
drawing – from ten ‘till Eleven Sat over the Fire
Conversing with My beloved. A Silent, happy Day’.

Sarah and Eleanor lived happily there for 50
years, living the life of their choice and challenging
the conventions of their era. The public were
captivated by their unconventional way of life. They
received many distinguished visitors and acquired
a celebrity-like status which meant that there was
a popular demand for prints of them. There are
several examples in the Museum’s collection. It is
hard to know if their relationship was sexual or not,
but it was certainly loving.

Although the Ladies of Llangollen’s fame was
exceptional, romantic female friendships were not
unusual in 18th century in Europe. Women spent
a great deal of time in each other’s company and
often developed strong, intense relationships. Female friends often wrote to one another using passionate, romantic language that can suggest a sexual relationship to modern readers, but which may simply have reflected the conventions of friendship. As urbanisation increased during the 19th century, unmarried women in cities increasingly lived together as companions, sharing their lives and homes. In America, these arrangements became known as Boston marriages. These relationships were often serious, emotional and long-term. As with romantic friendships in the 18th century, women had to be discreet to avoid censure and discrimination. And again, whether such relationships were also sometimes sexual is mostly unclear.
15. Ain Sakhri Sculpture (Room 51)

The artist Alberto Giacometti said that ‘A sculpture is not an object, it is a question mark’. Look carefully at this small stone object. What do you see?

This sculpture was found in the 1930s at a place called Ain Sakhri, near Bethlehem in Palestine. It was made around 11,000 years ago, when people in the western Middle East still lived by hunting gazelle and collecting plant foods, but were making the gradual transition to farming. There is no written evidence from this period.

This remarkable object is the oldest known sculpture of a couple having sex anywhere in the world. Made of a single sparkling piece of calcite, it shows the lovers face to face. But their facial features are not depicted and the figures appear almost in low relief. To achieve this, the sculptor used another stone to chip away the background
area, probably after lightly incising the outlines with a sharp stone tool. Calcite is hard to work, so the piece would have taken many hours to make. Its apparent simplicity marks considerable technical skill, artistry and originality, which are criteria for it to be called both a work of art and a masterpiece. It is unique, and we can only speculate about who made it and why.

It is usually considered to show a man and a woman, but should we assume this so readily? Can you identify the gender of the figures? One person has their arms around the shoulders of the other, whose legs are drawn up around the waist of the first. This tender sexual embrace is made more explicit because the sculpture is ingeniously phallic, whichever way you look at it. That the object is extremely phallic might suggest that it is concerned with masculinity and fertility.

As the maker was part of a community that was starting to breed farm animals from wild species,
it is possible that the sculpture reflects an awareness of the male role in reproduction. And this is supported by the presence of other phallic sculptures in sites of this period that might be more directly associated with fertility or reference to a creation myth.

The sculpture’s ambiguity is a reminder that we should not project our assumptions unthinkingly onto the past. We should not assume that ‘heterosexuality’ or the modern nuclear family as we know them are the default options for any society, ancient or otherwise. This audio tour provides plenty of evidence that human history and culture are more varied than we might initially assume. And looking at any object, we need to remember that we cannot know the desire of the person who made it or the person who held it. The everyday intimate histories that surround any object are always partly hidden, partly lost.

Whether the sculpture represents a man and
a woman, or two men, or two women is open to interpretation. All that remains is the reflection of their human love.