Collecting and empire

Follow the trail
Exploring Collecting and empire

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

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

This trail takes in several galleries, most of which are on the Ground floor. Viewing all the objects, in the order listed, will take around 60–70 minutes. When you visit each object you'll find more information there about how the Museum acquired it.

Previous page: A sculpture from the Nereid Monument, Turkey, about 380 BC.

Dance costume (Bwai ni Mwaie), Kiribati, various dates 1982–2017.
1. **Lion statues of Amenhotep III**
   Room 4
   In 1829 Lord Prudhoe, the Duke of Northumberland, arranged the shipment of these lions to England from Jebel Barkal, Sudan. He donated them to the British Museum in 1835.

2. **The Exekias Amphora**
   Room 13
   This amphora by the ancient Athenian potter and painter Exekias came to the Museum in 1836. It was purchased in Paris at the posthumous sale of works belonging to the collector and diplomat Edmé-Antoine Durand (1768–1835).

3. **The Nereid Monument**
   Room 17
   The Ottoman Sultanate in Constantinople (Istanbul) authorised Charles Fellows’ excavations at Xanthos and his subsequent removal of parts of the Nereid monument, a fourth-century BC tomb.

4. **Statue of Ankhrenepnefer**
   Room 4
   This temple statue was excavated by the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1883 and presented to the British Museum. It was a diplomatic gift from the Egyptian ruler, Khedive Mohamed Tawfiq Pasha (1852–92).
Ancestral screen from Nigeria
Room 25
This is one of 11 ancestral screens entrusted by Kalabari chiefs to a British administrative officer between 1914 and 1916, to save them from destruction by a local fundamentalist Christian movement.

Palace door and lintel from Nigeria
Room 25
This door, carved for the palace at Ikere in Nigeria, was displayed in 1924 at the British Empire Exhibition, Wembley. It was presented to the Museum by the Ogoga (king) of Ikere who was given a European-style throne made in Britain in return.

Military tunic from Sudan
Room 25
This officer’s tunic was taken from the battle of Atbara as spoils of war in 1898, following the defeat of Sudanese nationalist forces by an Anglo-Egyptian army. The widow of the commander of the British Brigade at Atbara subsequently presented it to the Museum.

Potlatch Kwakwaka’wakw mask from Canada
Room 26
Seized by the Canadian authorities during a potlatch ceremony in 1921, then illegal under Canadian law, this mask was sold to a private collector who eventually donated it to the British Museum.
9 West African drum, collected in Virginia
Room 26
This drum, made by the Akan people, Ghana, was taken to Virginia during the period of the slave trade and came to the British Museum as part of its founding collection, bequeathed by Sir Hans Sloane.

10 Puppets and masks from Java
Room 1
Sir Stamford Raffles, who established Singapore as a British port, collected large numbers of objects, including those on display here, while serving as Lieutenant-Governor of Java in the 1810s.

11 Soup plate from China
Room 1
Commodore Lord Anson of the British East India Company circumnavigated the world in 1743. He commissioned a porcelain dinner service, including this plate, on a visit to Canton in 1747.

12 Shield from New South Wales, Australia
Room 1
The details of the acquisition of this shield are not known but it is likely that it was collected in the early days of the British colony at Sydney from 1788 and received at the Museum by 1817.
Figure from Polynesia
Room 2
This sculpture was acquired by the London Missionary Society when they converted the people of Mangareva, French Polynesia, to Christianity in the mid-19th century.

Pukara, a painting from Western Australia
Room 24
Pukara, featuring ancestral Dreaming sites, was painted for sale in 2013 by senior Aboriginal men of the Pila Nguru (Spinifex people) of the desert region of Western Australia.

Dance costume from Kiribati
Room 24
Members of the Kiribati community in Britain donated items to enable the Museum to display a complete dance costume as part of a co-curated project.

Milk vessel from Somalia,
Room 24
Diana Powell-Cotton, an ethnographic collector and photographer, purchased this vessel along with other items during a fieldtrip to Italian Somaliland in 1934–35. She subsequently donated it to the Museum.
Betel-nut cutter from Sri Lanka
Room 33
Hugh Nevill was a colonial official who spent most of his life in Sri Lanka. He acquired this cutter for preparing the narcotic betel-nut from the Kandyan Society of Arts.

Sword from India
Room 33
Tipu Sultan, who ruled the powerful kingdom of Mysore, died defending his capital when the British captured it in 1799 and took this sword as a trophy.

Thuggee model from India
Room 33
Made for a British railway owner who gave it to the Museum in 1847, this model reflects a colonial stereotype.
This map shows the locations of the objects in this trail.
Lower floor

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Look out for this graphic to help you find the objects.
Short of time?

If you only have half an hour, focus on these three objects:

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15. **Dance costume from Kiribati**
   Room 24
   Members of the Kiribati community in Britain donated items to enable the Museum to display a complete dance costume as part of a co-curated project.

The Museum regularly lends objects to other institutions around the world. This means that from time to time, some of the featured objects may be temporarily removed from display.
Further objects will be added to this selection in the future as the result of ongoing research and collaborative work.

Ancestral screen from Nigeria, 19th century.

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