

Major exhibition on luxury in the Persian empire

Luxury and power: Persia to Greece

4 May – 13 August 2023

Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery

Supported by:

American Friends of the British Museum

BullionVault

With additional support from Julie and
Stephen Fitzgerald; and Steven Larcombe
and Sonya Leydecker

Images available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc68mhvc>

This major exhibition at the British Museum will explore the relationship between luxury and power in the Middle East and southeast Europe between 550-30 BC. This was a period when the Persian empire of ancient Iran clashed with the cities and kingdoms of Greece before it was conquered by Alexander, king of Macedon, known to history as 'Alexander the Great'.

Luxury and power: Persia to Greece moves beyond ancient Greek spin to delve into a more complex story of luxury and power in ancient Iran, Athens, and the world of Alexander. Drawing on exquisite objects from Afghanistan to Italy, it explores how the royal Persian court used objects of exquisite luxury as markers of authority, defining a distinct style that was copied by different social classes throughout the empire. Early democratic Athens rejected Persian culture as decadent yet adopted luxury in intriguing ways. Alexander then swept aside the Persian empire and ushered in a new age in which eastern and western styles of luxury were fused.

Among the exceptional loans to the exhibition is the extraordinary Panagyurishte Treasure from Bulgaria. Accidentally discovered by three brothers in 1949, these treasures are outstanding examples of ancient metalworking and demonstrate the influence of Persian and Greek luxury across the Balkans. The Treasure consists of nine richly decorated gold vessels: eight *rhyta* used to pour wine and one bowl to drink it.

The exhibition will also feature objects from the British Museum collection, bringing together astonishing artefacts of gold, silver and glass. A gilt silver *rhyton* shaped as a griffin is a remarkable example of Persian craft. Originally used as a wine-pourer, this drinking vessel reflects the opulence of the Persian court.

Alongside these stunning Persian vessels will sit Athenian examples of drinking vessels, influenced by their Persian contemporaries. A pottery *rhyton*, crafted in the form of a lion's head, demonstrates how ancient Greece emulated and incorporated styles of precious-metal luxury from the Persian court.

Also from the Museum's collection will be a gold wreath from Turkey, similar to those found in elite tombs in the kingdom of Macedonia. The gold oak wreath, consisting of two branches

with a bee with two cicadas, showcases the spread of luxury across the region and how styles evolved into the period after the death of Alexander in 323 BC.

(Dr) Jamie Fraser at the British Museum, said: “Traditionally, we have viewed the Persians and their apparently “decadent” love of luxury through the eyes of their enemies, the Greeks. This exhibition is a chance to explore beyond these biased accounts and understand how Persians wielded luxury as a political tool across a vast and complex empire.”

(Dr) Henry Bishop-Wright at the British Museum, said: “This exhibition is a superb opportunity to explore different notions of luxury across the Persian, Greek and later Hellenistic worlds; particularly, how they interrelate and inform contemporary attitudes. It’s incredibly exciting to display the Panagyurishte Treasure, a once-in-a-generation loan, in this wider context.”

Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum, said: “*Luxury and power: Persia to Greece* provides a fascinating opportunity to look at the ways luxury influenced political power across Persia and Greece. The exhibition explores the people of the past and their way of life, from the highest elite of the Persian court to the ordinary citizens who were affected by them.

“I would like to express my gratitude to our exhibition supporters the American Friends of the British Museum; BullionVault; Julie Fitzgerald and Stephen Fitzgerald; and Steven Larcombe and Sonya Leydecker. I’d also like to extend my thanks to the Bulgarian Ambassador H.E. Marin Raykov as well as the National History Museum in Sofia. Without their support, we would not be able to present such exhibitions, allowing visitors to discover and experience cultures from around the world.”

Notes to Editors:

Luxury and power: Persia to Greece runs from 4 May 2023 in the Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery at the British Museum.

Open Saturday – Thursday 10.00–17.00, Friday 10.00–20.30. Last entry 70 mins before closing.

Under 16s free, 2-for-1 tickets for students on Fridays, and concessions and group rates available.

britishmuseum.org/luxuryandpower

To coincide with the exhibition, a lavishly illustrated catalogue, *Luxury and power: Persia to Greece*, written by James Fraser with Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and Henry Cosmo Bishop-Wright, will be published by the British Museum Press in May 2023. Hardback, £35, ISBN 9780714111964. For more information on the book please contact Toni Allum tallum@britishmuseum.org

BullionVault

BullionVault is the world-leading marketplace for private investors to own and trade physical precious metals. Open 24/7 since launching in 2005, its technology now enables more than 100,000 users from 175 countries to access the low costs and high security of the professional bullion market, starting from 1 gram at a time. Together those users today hold over £3.0 billion (\$3.7bn, €3.5bn) of fully insured bullion in 5 locations worldwide, including more gold than most central banks keep in reserve. BullionVault has received three Queen's Awards for Enterprise, the prestigious UK business prize, most recently in 2022 for International Trade.



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Further information: Contact the Press Office: 020 7323 8522 / communications@britishmuseum.org

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