Luxury and power
Persia to Greece
About this guide

This guide gives you an overview of the exhibition’s layout and main texts. An online large print guide containing the entire text is also available.

Your visit will take about 50 minutes.
Luxury and power
Persia to Greece

Between 490 and 479 BC, the Persian empire tried, and failed, to conquer mainland Greece. Many Greeks explained their victory as a triumph of plain living over a ‘barbarian’ enemy weakened by luxury.

Ancient objects reveal a different story. The Persian court used luxury as an expression of prestige and power, with a distinctive style that was imitated and adapted across cultural borders, even influencing democratic Athens and, later, the world of Alexander the Great.
Achaemenid Persia
Feasting like kings

At its greatest extent, around 500 BC, the Persian empire was the largest in the world. Ruled by the Achaemenid kings, it was centred in modern-day Iran and stretched from Libya to Pakistan.

The Achaemenid court used luxury to help establish authority over its vast territory. Provinces (called ‘satrapies’) delivered tribute to the king. The king, in turn, commanded loyalty by dispensing extravagant gifts. Governors (or ‘satraps’) collected tribute and granted largesse on a local level.

Most surviving accounts of the Persian empire were by Greek writers. Many of them condemned the luxury of the Achaemenid court as decadent and corrupt.
Luxury in Athens
‘Nothing in excess’

Rich Athenians had long sought luxury for social prestige. However, as Athens developed democratic government, displays of personal wealth were curbed to contain social conflict. The emphasis on restraint echoed a famous inscription on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: ‘Nothing in excess’.

Athens grew increasingly powerful after the Greek-Persian Wars. Luxury goods, including exotica from the east, became more widely available. Luxury flaunted to elevate personal status was considered a threat to the social order, possibly even betraying Persian sympathies. Yet luxury was acceptable when it enhanced the prestige of the city. Alternatively, Athenians found ways to adapt or redefine eastern luxuries, making them compatible with Greek culture.
As conqueror of the Achaemenid empire, Alexander III of Macedon (‘Alexander the Great’) became ruler of many cultural groups across southeast Europe, the Middle East and central Asia. Like the Achaemenid kings before him, he used astonishing displays of luxury to project authority across this diverse world and to win the loyalty of local elites.

Alexander died in 323 BC and his empire broke into separate kingdoms ruled by his generals and their successors. These Greek-speaking dynasties followed Alexander’s embrace of luxury, blending Greek styles with local traditions to create distinctive Hellenistic cultures (after ‘Hellenising’, or ‘making Greek’).
Imperial Rome
Luxury after Alexander

The Hellenistic kingdoms were gradually overtaken by the Romans in the Mediterranean and by the Parthian empire across the Middle East. The last Hellenistic ruler, Cleopatra VII of Egypt, was defeated by Rome in 31 BC. Her death marked the end of an era.

In Rome, exotic goods associated with the east continued to bestow status and prestige. Yet while some Romans revelled in the show of wealth, others regarded it as excessive and decadent. This uneasy combination of desire and distrust survives in our perception of luxury today.