

Press release

## ***For the curious and interested***

Down County Museum, Downpatrick (20 January – 13 April 2024)

Amgueddfa Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth (27 April – 20 July 2024)

*Supported by 'Sloane Lab: Looking back to build future shared collections,' a Towards a National Collection Discovery Project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council*

Press images: <https://bit.ly/3Sh98Sb>

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**LONDON, 18 January:** Explore new insights into the founding collection of the British Museum, formed over 250 years ago.

From January to July 2024, a new British Museum Touring Exhibition *For the curious and interested* will travel to Northern Ireland and Wales.

Physician and naturalist Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753) left his collection of antiquities, artworks and natural curiosities to the nation on his death, intending for it to be preserved and used for the purpose of 'satisfying the desire of the curious.'

This touring exhibition will, for the first time, reunite a selection of objects from the collection that Sloane assembled, including books and prints, cultural objects, and natural history rarities, that are now cared for by the British Museum, the British Library and the Natural History Museum.

*For the curious and interested* is part of a wider project entitled *Sloane Lab: Looking back to build future shared collections* that aims to develop pioneering ways for people to search across digital collections from different museums and libraries, using the collection of Sir Hans Sloane as a case study. It is a 'Towards a National Collection' (TaNC) Discovery Project, led by University College London, and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Confronting the complex history behind Sloane's vast collection, which was financed in part by profits from transatlantic enslavement, the touring exhibition will reveal how and why objects from across the world were brought together. It will also explore some of the stories of those Sloane worked with and relied upon for their knowledge and skills, including indigenous and enslaved people, as well as other collectors, explorers and naturalists around the world.

Demonstrating the breadth and diversity of the collection that Sloane assembled, each item in this exhibition offers a unique insight into Sloane's curiosity about the world. Key objects include:

- **Carved ivory hunting horn (about 1490–1530)** Local artists in Sierra Leone carved this ornate horn with images of Portuguese men who went to the West Coast of Africa to trade in gold, ivory and people. The imperial iconography suggests this horn was commissioned for a Portuguese patron, but local artists also included African animals including crocodiles and serpents.
- ***A Voyage to Jamaica (1725)*** Loaned by the Natural History Museum. Sloane's personal copy of his book about the natural history of Jamaica, based on his time there in 1687–89, while he was physician to the Governor of the island. This lavishly illustrated book features images of animals and plants. Sloane also describes the violent treatment of enslaved African people he witnessed during this time.
- **Silk embroidered flowers (17th century)** Loaned by the British Library. Stitches of golden thread form delicate curving branches that are the backdrop for these lush embroidered flowers. Highly stylised, they were created by an unrecorded Chinese artist with thread coloured by botanically-sourced dyes. These rare textiles may have been acquired by those working for the East India or Dutch East India Companies who knew of Sloane's interest in botany.
- **Six etchings of shells, Wenceslaus Hollar (about 1645–46)** Made by the Bohemian printmaker, Wenceslaus Hollar, these rare, detailed etchings depict shells of tropical species from south-east Asia. Such shells were imported to Europe in the 1600s, often for use in ornamental objects. Shells were a rich source of artistic investigation, but they also had ritual and practical uses in indigenous cultures.

Co-created in collaboration with the two UK partner museums and their local communities, each venue will bring a unique perspective to the exhibition. Starting in the region of Northern Ireland where Sloane was born, audiences will be invited to be curious and interested, and to engage with the histories and legacies of the collection in new ways.

Dr Alicia Hughes, Project Curator for *Sloane Lab: Looking back to build future shared collections* at the British Museum, said:

*“Hans Sloane bestowed his collection to Britain in 1753 on condition that it be used to create a free museum for ‘satisfying the desire of the curious.’ Now, for the first time, we are reuniting objects from Sloane’s original collection, revealing new connections and meanings that speak to the ‘curiosity’ and interests of contemporary audiences. Working with different communities around the UK, the collaborative process of curating this display has prompted thoughtful discussions about Sloane’s legacy, his involvement with transatlantic enslavement, and how we present this collection for future audiences.”*

Prof Dr Julianne Nyhan, FRHistS, Technische Universität Darmstadt and University College London, said:

*“The Sloane Lab project works to mend the broken links between the past and present of the founding collection of the British Museum, Natural History Museum and the British Library.*

*“This important exhibition shows how local communities, curators and academics can work together to ensure that heritage collections can be made available to the widest possible audiences, who can then use, learn and benefit from them, developing new perspectives on our shared history.”*

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## **Notes to editors**

***For the curious and interested*** will be on display at Down County Museum, Downpatrick (20 January – 13 April 2024) and Amgueddfa Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth (27 April – 20 July 2024).

### **The British Museum’s National Programmes**

The British Museum is committed to sharing the collection and our knowledge as widely as possible to create a positive educational, social and economic impact across the UK. In 2022/23 we lent nearly 2,000 objects to 122 museums and galleries, reaching over 6.5 million visitors outside London.

Our loans to partnership museums and galleries facilitate new perspectives on our shared global history, reflecting diverse viewpoints, lived experiences and collective ideas.

The British Museum also manages the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) in England, recording and sharing British archaeological discoveries to help shape our understanding of the past.

## **Towards a National Collection**

Towards a National Collection is a major five-year research and development programme that aims to underpin the creation of a unified virtual 'national collection', dissolving barriers between the different collections of the UK's museums, archives, libraries and galleries. Its ambition is to extend and diversify researcher and public access to our world-renowned collections beyond the physical boundaries of their location. The innovation driven by the programme will help to maintain the UK's world leadership in digital humanities and set global standards in the field.

The programme is funded through a £18.9 million investment by UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI) Strategic Priorities Fund and delivered by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The programme Directorate is based at the Independent Research Organisation, Historic Environment Scotland.

## **The British Library**

We are the national library of the UK and we are here for everyone. Our shelves hold over 170 million items – a living collection that gets bigger every day. Although our roots extend back centuries, we aim to collect everything published in the UK today, tomorrow and far into the future. Our trusted experts care for this collection and open it up for everyone to spark new discoveries, ideas and to help people do incredible things.

We have millions of books, and much more besides. Our London and Yorkshire sites hold collections ranging from newspapers and maps to sound recordings, patents, academic journals, as well as a copy of every UK domain website and blog. Our public spaces provide a place to research, to meet friends, to start up a new business or simply to get inspired by visiting our galleries and events. We work with partners and libraries across the UK and the world to make sure that as many people as possible have the chance to use and explore our collections, events and expertise. And we're always open online.

## **The Natural History Museum**

The Natural History Museum is a world-leading science centre and one of the most visited attractions in the UK. A global source of curiosity, inspiration and joy.

Our vision is to build a future in which both people and the planet thrive.

We aim to be a catalyst for change, engaging advocates for the planet in everything that we do. Our 350 scientists are finding solutions to the planetary emergency in all aspects of life.

Visit, join and support the Natural History Museum today. Protecting the planet. It's in our nature.



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### **Further information**

Contact the Press Office: [communications@britishmuseum.org](mailto:communications@britishmuseum.org)

High resolution images and caption sheet available at: <https://bit.ly/3Sh98Sb>