LONDON, 1 February: In August 2023, the announcement that around 2000 objects from the Museum’s collection were missing, stolen or damaged – the majority of which were classical gems and items of gold jewellery – sparked a renewed public interest in these objects.

Today the British Museum reveals a new display that will explore the significance of classical gems and the impression they have left throughout history. Seen as a window onto the ancient Mediterranean world, they were used as seals, worn as jewellery or collected as objects of beauty in their own right.

Highly coveted by royalty, aristocrats, artists, and antiquarians, Rediscovering gems will look at these incredibly small but highly coveted masterpieces, whose designs reflect, and serve as a record of, the personal tastes and aesthetic preferences seen throughout history.

Gems were hugely popular during the 18th century in Europe and visitors to Rediscovering gems will be able to see them displayed in a typical gem cabinet reflective of the period alongside other collector’s equipment, such as a magnifying glass, cast impressions and drawings.

Stolen and recovered items

Last year the Museum announced the discovery of thefts from the collection, and a recovery programme was immediately launched. Thanks to the hard work of the recovery team, and the cooperation of the dealers and members of the public, hundreds of items have been returned. A selection of the recovered gems will be on display for the first time in this showcase. This includes two Roman glass gems from the late 1st century BC to early 1st century AD: an intaglio which features a profile bust of Minerva and a cameo with a bust of Cupid.

The British Museum is committed to recovering all the stolen items and to preventing thefts from happening again. A dedicated team within the Museum is working with the Metropolitan Police Service and with an international group of experts in gems, collection history and art loss recovery, to locate and return the remaining missing items.

George Osborne, Chair of the Board of Trustees, said: ‘We promised we’d show the world the gems that were stolen and recovered - rather than hide them away. It’s another example of culture change underway at the British Museum, as we open up and take ownership of our own story.’

Tom Harrison, Keeper of the Department of Greece and Rome, said: ‘We are delighted to be able to put on this exhibition and showcase some of the stunning recovered gems which are now safely back in the Museum’s collection. It’s also an interesting opportunity to cast some light on an underappreciated and very beautiful art form. A huge thanks goes out to all those who have lent support and helped us in the recovery programme.’

Rediscovering gems will be on display for free in Room 3 from 15 February – 15 June 2024. For more information please visit britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/rediscovering-gems
Notes to editors

For more information on the recovery programme please visit our dedicated webpage: britishmuseum.org/recovery-missing-items

Further information
Contact the Communications team: communications@britishmuseum.org
High resolution images available at: https://bit.ly/49czqul