

The British Museum



The **British Museum** in **London** is one of the world's largest and most important **museums** of human **history** and **culture**. It has more than seven million objects from all continents. They illustrate and document the story of human culture from its beginning to the present. As with all other national museums and art galleries in Britain, the Museum charges no admission fee.

A drawing of the Museum under construction in 1828



The British Museum set up in 1753 and opened in 1759. It was the first museum in the world to be open to everyone. The museum gradually grew over the next two hundred years. It has nearly six million visitors a year and is the third most popular art museum in the world.





Some of the museum's most popular and important exhibits include the Rosetta Stone and the Elgin Marbles



The Elgin Marbles, the collection of marble sculptures that were taken from the **Parthenon in Athens**, is one of the museum's most famous attractions. They are located in the purpose-built Parthenon Galleries. The sculptures, also known as the Parthenon Marbles, were obtained by Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin and diplomat in Constantinopal in the Ottoman Empire, which at that time included Greece.

Earl Elgin obtained permission "to take away any pieces of stone with old inscriptions or figures there on", to prevent any more damage by the Turkish.

Lord Elgin's collection was at first displayed at his own house, but in 1816 the House of Commons decided to purchase the collection and hand it over to the British Museum.



- The Rosetta Stone in the British Museum



The Rosetta Stone on display in the Museum in 1874.



Cavalry from the Parthenon
Frieze, West II, British Museum.



History

The history of the British Museum began with the English physicist Hans Sloane, who died aged 93 in 1753. During his life, he had collected many important things from all around the world. When he died, he did not want his collection to be split up between his relatives. He sold his collection to the Parliament of King George II. The Parliament set up the British Museum to hold the collection. By the time he died, Sloane had collected over 80,000 objects from all over the world including Egypt, Greece, Rome and the Americas. The collection was mostly books and manuscripts. There were many important archaeological pieces included as well.

Egyptian Collection

Another highlight of the British Museum is the extensive Egyptian collection. Besides many sarcophagi and statues, including an enormous one of Pharaoh Ramesses II, the collection is home to the famous **Rosetta stone**, used by Jean-François Champollion to decipher the hieroglyphic writing. The text on the stone, created **in 196 BC** after the end of the Egyptian dynasties, is written in three different writings: Greek, hieroglyphic and demotic (a simplified form of hieroglyphic).

The British Museum is also known for its very large and popular collection of Egyptian **mummies** and **sarcophagi**. You can even find animal mummies here.



Bust of Ramesses II

Assyrian collection

- The Assyrian collection features relief carvings from the palaces of the Assyrian kings at Nimrud, Khorsabad and Nineveh. The enormous **winged bulls** from the palace of Sargon II are especially impressive.



Assyrian
winged bull



- **Statue of Mausollos**, king of Caria. It is on display in Greek and Rome department of the British Museum

Department of the Middle East

- Key objects in the collection include:
- The **Cyrus Cylinder**, a **cylindrical** scroll from 539 BC. Written on it is the story of Cyrus, king of **Babylon**. He gave rights back to the people of Assyria after the previous king enslaved them and burned their **temples**.
- Several ten feet tall statues of **lions** and **bulls** with **human** heads.
- The fifteen foot high **bronze gates** of the fortress of Galawat.



The Cyrus Cylinder on display in Room 52 of the British Museum. It is often seen as the first written example of human rights from anywhere in the world

Other departments

- The many other departments in the museum include Africa, Oceania, and the Americas; Sudan; Asia; Coins and Medals; Conservation, Documentation and Science; Greek and Roman Antiquities; the Middle East; Portable Antiquities and Treasure; Prehistory and Europe; and Prints and Drawings.

The Museum's Collection

- The collection found at the British Museum is enjoyed by millions each year. Because the museum is so large, many visitors take more than one day to explore. Not all of the more than seven million artifacts are on display, but much of the collection constantly rotates so you'll see something new with each visit.