The British Museum

Explore the British Museum collections at home

April 2020

The British Museum's Community Partnership team wishes all of our community partners well during these times and look forward to welcoming you back to the British Museum in the future.

The British Museum is closed temporarily in response to government advice concerning the current Coronavirus (COVID 19) health emergency. As a result our Community Partnerships programmes and activities during this time are temporarily suspended.

We realise these are difficult times for many, and we want to help you and your audiences to remain connected to the museum. We hope you will be able to share across your networks and with your audiences.

Through all of our community partnership work, we get to delve into our fascinating collection of objects and learn more about people, cultures, customs and traditions. We have rounded up some of the ways in which you can stay connected to the British Museum during this closure. Follow the links to read blogs and articles, watch videos, listen to podcasts and discover parts of the Museum you may never have visited before. Click on any of the blue links and they will take you to the relevant resource.

About the British Museum

19th century print of the British Museum Great Russell Street entrance.

The British Museum was founded by Sir Hans Sloane in 1753 and opened its doors in 1759. It was the world's first free national museum to cover all fields of human knowledge, open to visitors from across the world.

Today, the British Museum continues to bring together the cultures of the world, spanning continents and oceans. Our unique collection of 8 million objects allows us to explore the extraordinary diversity of human cultures, from small communities to vast empires, and discover the many forms and expressions human beings have given to every aspect of life.

To get you started:

Discover 29 things you (probably) didn't know about the British Museum in this blog post**.**
29 things you (probably) didn't know about the British Museum

The British Museum opened its doors to visitors on 15 January 1759. The first national public museum in the world, it was – and still is – open to 'all studious and curious persons.' To celebrate the anniversary, Director Hartwig Fischer talks about the people who come to the Museum today, and the people who are represented in the collection. Watch the video here: 258 years of the British Museum (2017)

Collections

The British Museum has over 90 rooms that span the history of the world. There are also about eight million objects in its collection, of which half can be seen on the British Museum collection database.

Here you can explore the collection, from some of the earliest objects created by man to works by contemporary artists.

Collections online

The British Museum website also has a selection of collection highlights and themes including desire, love, identity and death and memory, as well as the Americas, China and Africa, which reveal fascinating stories behind objects.

British Museum collection

If you're interested in the history of the British Museum's collections, here's a blog about Sir Hans Sloane "The Man Who Collected the World."

Hans Sloane's specimen tray. © Natural History Museum

Curator’s Corner

A good way of starting to explore our collections is through the British Museum’s YouTube series ‘Curator’s Corner’. Here a selection of the museums curatorial staff talk about their research and what it’s like working with some of the world’s oldest and most unique objects.

Behind the scenes in the Museum’s archive - Curator's Corner

British Museum Archivist Francesca Hillier takes us deep into the archives and unearths records from over two and a half centuries of the Museum's history.
Watch video

Hands on with the Sutton Hoo sword - Curator's Corner
Sue Brunning and her trusty foam sword (newly dubbed Flexcalibur by commentator Pipe2DevNull) are back for another sword story. This time Sue takes us up close and personal with one of the most famous swords ever discovered.
Watch video

An introduction to Ming blue and white proclain – Curator’s Corner
The Ming Dynasty is famed for its blue and white porcelain, which took over European dinning tables thanks to trade with the Dutch, Portuguese and English. However, you might not know exactly how to tell the difference between a Hongwu and a Longqing piece. If you don't, never fear!
Watch video

Blog

The British Museum blog pages have an array of different stories, objects in focus, exhibitions and events and curator’s corner highlights from across the museum. We’ve highlighted a few below:

Disposable cups and recycled exhibitions
Single-use and disposable objects are not a recent phenomenon, but the environmental impact of modern-day single-use items is huge. Kayte McSweeney and Julia Farley examine two disposable cups made 3,500 years apart that are on display in our current free exhibition, and take a look at what the Museum is doing to reduce its environmental impact.
Read blog

Conserving a suit of samurai armour

Read how organics conservator Tania Desloge discusses the conservation work undertaken on the newly acquired set of samurai armour that showcases in the refurbished Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries.

Read blog

Tania Desloge, Organics Conservator, British Museum, September 2018

Community voices and the recent *Troy: myth and reality* exhibition

In recent years the British Museum has been experimenting with how to bring a variety of perspectives and voices into the interpretation of our new displays and exhibition. One of the ways we have done this is through partnering with community groups to explore how their knowledge, experiences and opinions might compliment, supplement and add to the stories being developed. Our most recent exhibition, *Troy: myth and reality,* seemed an obvious opportunity to advocate for the addition of contemporary community voices with its deeply emotive, personal and timeless themes of migration, conflict, love, trauma and the plight of women. To enable this to happen we reached out and invited two community organisations to work with us and co-produce interpretation, object labels and audio pieces, for parts of the final section of the exhibition; *'Troy - enduring stories'*

See more information about the exhibition *Troy: myth and reality*

Who did we work with?
The Community Partnerships team have been working with CRISIS a national charity for homeless people, in some capacity for over 10 years. Find out more about the work of CRISIS.

We identified several stories within the Troy narrative that would appeal and formed a collective of 4 people and their support worker who would help the Museum co-interpret some of the artworks. All the CRISIS community partners involved had experienced displacement from their native country as a result of conflict and we hoped they would bring a real-life cotemporary perspective and experience of what it's like to have to flea or involuntarily leave your home. This really helped visitors connect and empathise with the situation that not only faced people in the story, like Aeanas the famous Trojan refugee who supposedly founded Rome, but affects millions of people today around the globe.

Looking to disrupt the stereotypical idea of what a 'hero' can be in relation to the story of the Trojan war and its many warrior characters a new community partner relationship was formed with Waterloo Uncovered, an archaeology and training based charity that works with ex-servicemen/veterans mostly who have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Find out more information on Waterloo Uncovered.

We worked with 6 people from Waterloo Uncovered and their support worker who added a highly personal led account of their experience of serving in the armed forces in contemporary conflicts and wars and the long-term effects that's had on them and their families. This was in stark comparison to the glorious accounts of warrior heroes in the Troy myth.

What did we do?
Working with both groups over a three-month period we ran multiple workshops with each exploring the stories, themes and topics of the exhibition and choosing the artworks most relevant to
focus on. We produced six text labels next to 6 paintings and two pieces of audio which allowed visitors to listen to members of the community-groups reflect on their personal connection to two of the paintings.

For the women in the CRISIS group they particularly connected to the plight of women in the Troy story and were as such drawn to the pair of Evelyn De Morgan paintings *Helen of Troy* and *Cassandra* (both painted in 1898). They were intrigued by the symbolism in the paintings and how this helped you unpick the often under-told story of the women in the Troy myth.

They also reflected heavily on the more luxurious elements of the paintings; the beautiful clothes the women are wearing and their apparent good health, which they stated were not typical of the experience of most women during times of war and something that could be used to get visitors thinking about the realities of actual conflict. Working together with curatorial and interpretation staff the group wrote a complimentary label for the paintings which they hoped would help visitors connect with and discover how women in wars often suffer a great deal and often at the hands of men, similar to both Helen and Cassandra.

Positioned next to the curatorial interpretation the community written label says:
Helen and Cassandra are beautiful and well-dressed, but they represent how women are often the pawns of men and suffer hugely in times of war. Like many women in these situations today, they have no say in their own fate. Taken advantage of by men, they are not part of the conversation. They have no voice and little power. Helen is not given any choices, while Cassandra speaks the truth, but the gods make sure that no-one will believe her. Look beyond your first impressions of these paintings – the hardship behind the beauty, the suffering behind the mask of beautiful faces

Achilles is the ultimate warrior but he has feelings. Soldiers can kill but they can also grieve as well.
Member of Waterloo Uncovered, 2019

The above quote hangs over the 1770 drawing by Henry Fusilli above, which depicts Achilles lamenting over the body of his comrade, lover, friend, Patroclus. The members of Waterloo Uncovered were drawn to this painting claiming the anguish, pain and suffering were portrayed was something they all had felt when they had lost a comrade while serving in the army. They claimed the close bonds of friendship and shared experience meant loss and death are felt acutely and soldiers often blame themselves for what happened as they believe they have failed or let their comrades down by not being able to save them. This ‘survivors’ guilt’ is an affliction of many serving and veteran soldiers.