

THE BRITISH MUSEUM POLICY ON ACQUISITIONS

1. Preamble

1.1 This policy covers all objects under consideration for acquisition and registration within the collections of the British Museum, whether they are acquired by purchase, gift or fieldwork. This policy should be read alongside *The British Museum Policy on Loans*, *The British Museum Policy on Storage, Conservation and Documentation*, *The British Museum Policy on De-accessioning* and *The British Museum Policy on Display*.

1.2 This policy takes account of:

- The British Museum Act of 1963
- the UNESCO Agreement of 1970 (UK accession August 2002)
- The Code of Professional Ethics of the International Council of Museums (ICOM)
- The Code of Professional Ethics of the Museums Association (MA)
- The *Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003*
- *The British Museum Ethics Policy and Code of Conduct for Staff*.
- Paragraph 63 of *The Treasure Act 1996 Code of Practice (Revised) England and Wales* (Dept. for Culture, Media and Sport December 2002).
- Code of Practice on Archives for Museums in the United Kingdom

2. Purpose

2.1 The British Museum is a universal museum holding encyclopaedic collections of material from all continents and all periods of human history. These collections include artefacts from prehistory, antiquity, and the medieval and modern world, prints and drawings, coins and medals and ethnographic material.

2.2 The British Museum acquires material from different parts and cultures of the world and of different periods up to the present day for the following reasons: to document the world's cultures and civilizations, to further knowledge and understanding of them, and to add to the enlightenment and enjoyment of the international public availing itself of the Museum, thereby promoting better relations between people of differing cultures, nationalities and races.

3. Principles

Individual objects or integral groups of objects (e.g. a complete hoard or a collection) may be acquired if they satisfy the following criteria:

- they make a significant addition to the interpretation of one of the world's cultures, either directly or by virtue of their context;

- they are of value or potential value to one of our audiences, and will be made accessible to the public either by display or in a Students= Room.

4. Ethics

- 4.1 The Museum will acquire only objects that are legally available for acquisition (not, e.g. to which a vendor does not have legal title).
- 4.2.1 The Museum will not accept whether as a gift or bequest, or on purchase, any object without obtaining the confirmation of the donor or seller that s/he owns the object, and is able to transfer it free from encumbrances. The Museum must also have reasonable cause to believe that the current holder is legitimately entitled to retain the object or that the object was not stolen, illegally exported or illegally imported.
- 4.2.2 The British Museum deplores the looting of antiquities with the ensuing damage to archaeological sites and loss of cultural context. Archaeological objects are a finite resource and each loss or destruction of their context irrevocably diminishes the world's archaeological heritage. The Museum does not and will not acquire objects resulting from such looting.
- 4.2.3 The policy of the Trustees of the British Museum is to refuse to acquire objects that have been illegally excavated and/or illegally exported from their countries of origin since 1970.
- 4.2.4 There may be occasions when acquisition outside of the application of this policy is considered, as for example could occur where objects were otherwise under threat of destruction. Such circumstances would be treated as wholly exceptional and would be matters for discussion by the Trustees.
- 4.2.5 Wherever possible the Trustees will only acquire those objects that have documentation to show that they were exported from their country of origin before 1970 and this policy will apply to all objects of major importance. The Trustees recognize, however, that in practice many minor antiquities that are not accompanied by detailed documentary history or proof of origin and they reserve the right for the Museum's curators to use their best judgement as to whether such antiquities should be recommended for acquisition.
- 4.2.6 The Trustees recognise the principle that regional and national museums must sometimes act as repositories of last resort for antiquities originating within their areas of responsibility, and they will on occasion approve the acquisition of antiquities without documented provenance where it can reliably be inferred that they originated within the United Kingdom, and where such payment as may be made is not likely to encourage illicit excavation.
- 4.3 The Museum will pay due respect to the moral rights of other individuals, groups or organisations.

- 4.4 Gifts will not be accepted which are offered subject to conditions which are regarded as unreasonable or unduly onerous.
- 4.5 *Other Museums:* The Museum will work in collaboration with the collecting policies of other UK museums.
- 4.6 Duplicates are not normally acquired unless they add to the scholarly value and integrity of the collection.
- 4.7 *Value for money:* When an object is bought, the Museum must be satisfied that it is getting value for money.
- 4.8 The costs of acquisition, conservation, storage etc. must be taken into account when considering any acquisition and no acquisition will normally be made unless these costs can be fully funded. Very careful consideration in consultation with the Department of Conservation, Documentation and Science must be given before acquisition of objects made of materials that are inherently unstable. Objects in such poor condition that they cannot be stabilised by conservation treatments should not normally be acquired.

Context

- 4.9 Wherever possible the Museum will obtain/record contextual information about the objects it acquires.
- 4.10 Wherever possible the Museum will obtain the assignment of all subsisting intellectual property rights in the objects it acquires.

5. Responsibilities

- 5.1 The Museum Management Board is responsible for determining the overall allocation of money in the Plan to acquisition through purchase and excavation. The Trustees approve the budget as part of the Plan. The Director is responsible for determining the use of the designated reserve funds to cover opportunistic acquisitions.
- 5.2 Keepers are responsible for ensuring this policy is understood and implemented by the staff in their departments and that proper consultation with relevant colleagues within the Museum takes place before an acquisition is made.
- 5.3 Keepers are responsible for securing the Director's approval for purchases and gifts which are of greater value than their authority allows them to approve; and for obtaining the Director's support for acquisitions that need to be approved by the Trustees.
- 5.4 Keepers should consult the Keeper of Conservation, Documentation and Science about the care of the object or its state, and the implications of the acquisition in terms of the cost of display, storage or conservation work.

6. Assurance

- 6.1 The member of staff proposing an acquisition must gain the approval in the first instance of the Keeper of the Department. The Keeper shall satisfy him/herself that in relation to any acquisition this policy has been followed. The Keeper will submit any recommendation and certification to the Director and through him/her to the Trustees for acquisitions which exceed their respective levels of authority.
- 6.2 Keepers must bring any contentious issues in connection with acquisition to the attention of the Director and, if necessary, to the Trustees.

7. Review

This Policy will be reviewed from time to time and at least once every five years. In the event that significant changes to the Policy are made, every reasonable effort will be made to notify stakeholders, including the Council for Museums Libraries and Archives.

This Policy was approved by the Trustees of the British Museum on 26 March 2004 and will be reviewed no later than 2009.