

## 'Not everything was looted': British Museum to fight critics

*Museum to give talks in attempt to counter censure over colonial-era acquisitions*

By Haroon Siddique  
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*Collected Histories will attempt to provide greater context to some of the British Museum's collections. Photograph: The Trustees/British Museum*

The British Museum is launching an initiative intended to counter the perception that its collections derive only from looted treasures.

The monthly Collected Histories talks, which begin on Friday, will provide information on how certain artefacts entered the collection, with the museum saying it will offer a more nuanced take on these stories than is available elsewhere.

The museum has long faced criticism for displaying – and refusing to return – looted treasures, including the Parthenon Marbles, Rosetta Stone, and the Gweagal shield.

Earlier this year, the art historian Alice Procter's Uncomfortable Art Tours around London institutions, including the British Museum, made headlines for their attempts to expose the role of colonialism, with those on the tour given "Display It Like You Stole It" badges.

Dr Sushma Jansari, the curator of the Asian ethnographic and South Asia collections at the British Museum, said she had devised Collected Histories in response to Procter's tours.

"There are a lot of partial histories and they tend to focus on the colonial aspect of the collecting so you have a bunch of people who tend to be quite angry and upset," she said.

"We're trying to reset the balance a little bit. A lot of our collections are not from a colonial context; not everything here was acquired by Europeans by looting."

The free, curator-led talks will include addresses on objects from colonised places, with the first two on the Solomon Islands and south-east Asia respectively.

Jansari said there was a misguided impression that the British Museum did not know – or care – about how artefacts entered its collections, whereas a lot of people were actually researching the provenance of items.

She said the talks were an attempt to make that research public and demonstrate "there is a range of contexts in which this material is collected".

Her own talk, in March next year, will include the Bridge collection of Indian art. It was compiled by an East India Company general, Charles Stuart, but not in the way some might assume, she said.

"If you just say East India Company, general, collection of mainly Hindu and Buddhist material, most people would just say: 'Must be looted'," she said. "But this is a guy who converted to Hinduism; he practised ritual bathing, hired two Brahmins to look after the collection, he was absolutely anti Europeans proselytising Christianity in India. When you tell a more nuanced story, it doesn't fit other people's agendas but it's still fascinating. That's the difference between what we are doing and what other people are doing."

Procter said she welcomed the Collecting Histories series, but added that such projects were often defence mechanisms. She also stressed that even where items appeared to result from fair acquisitions, they had to be seen in the context of colonial relations and power imbalances.

"It's great that the British Museum are engaging with the fact that people want to know about the provenance of things in their collections, but this huge emphasis on legitimate provenance is often a very incomplete story," she said.

"There are plenty of things that are fairly given or bought that end up in museum collections. However, in the Solomon Island collection is a feasting trough that was taken as part of a punitive expedition and you can't talk about one thing without the other."