

In August of 2023, it was revealed that the British Museum had up to 2000 items in its collection that had been stolen, potentially by a high-ranking member of staff, who had been dismissed.<sup>1</sup> Thankfully, with the media coverage that this incident has warranted, many of the artefacts have slowly been recovered, with many being given as donations back to the museum. In the most recent update in May of 2024, it was revealed that 626 of these artefacts had been recovered.<sup>2</sup>

Many different online Newspapers reported on the stolen items. The BBC reported on the recovery of the stolen artefacts in May of 2024, placing heavy blame on the lack of recording of artefacts from the Museum, stating that ‘much of the collection remains uncatalogued and many records, including of gemstones, don't have photos.’<sup>3</sup> The BBC obviously believes that the lack of records had been a significant factor in why the member of staff was able to get away with stealing historical artefacts and selling them on for years. While the BBC seem to be under the impression that the artefacts were stolen due to lacking records, The Guardian seem more inclined to believe that the artefacts were stolen due to a failing of staff, mentioning that ‘Hartwig Fischer, the museum’s director at the time, resigned in August after failing to properly respond to warnings about the suspected thefts’<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the Guardian believes that there were a multitude of staff members that were either directly or indirectly responsible for this grave error. This clearly places the blame on the staff and not on the lack of records, which is in contrast with the BBC’s beliefs on the stolen and missing artefacts. In agreement with The Guardian, is the Museums Association. The Museums Association only mentions the ‘legal proceedings against its former curator Peter Higgs’<sup>5</sup> and not the diminished records of the British Museum as the BBC references. As such, it is obvious that the Museums Association is of the opinion that all the blame should be put on the lacking morals of its staff. While other Newspapers have been focusing on placing the blame, artnet has been focusing more on

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<sup>1</sup> The British Museum, *Announcement regarding missing, stolen and damaged items*, (2023) < [https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Announcement\\_regarding\\_missing\\_stolen\\_and\\_damaged\\_items.pdf](https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Announcement_regarding_missing_stolen_and_damaged_items.pdf)> [accessed 30 September 2024].

<sup>2</sup> The British Museum, *Recovery of missing items*, (2024) < <https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/departments/recovery-missing-items>> [accessed 30 September 2024].

<sup>3</sup> Darin Graham, *British Museum finds 268 more missing artefacts*, (2024) < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crgy4w221z5o#:~:text=The%20museum%20said%20up%20to,found%20all%20over%20the%20world.>> [accessed 30 September 2024].

<sup>4</sup> Harriet Sherwood, *British Museum says 626 items lost or stolen have been found*, (2024) < <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/article/2024/may/17/british-museum-items-lost-or-stolen-found>> [accessed 30 September 2024].

<sup>5</sup> Geraldine K. Addams, *British Museum recovers more objects that were missing from its collection*, (2024) < <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2024/05/british-museum-announces-return-of-more-stolen-and-missing-objects/#>> [accessed 30 September 2024].

the objects that have been stolen. Where the Guardian merely mentions that the stolen items included 'gold jewellery and gems of semiprecious stones'<sup>6</sup>, artnet goes into detail on 'a piece of Roman jewellery reportedly worth £50,000 (\$60,000) that was offered for a starting price of £40 (\$48).'<sup>7</sup> Clearly artnet is choosing to focus on the items of interest rather than why they were stolen as other papers have focussed on, taking a different stance on the stolen objects than others.

While the newspapers are blaming the lack of records and the failings of the staff of the British Museum, the general public are placing the blame on the British Museum as a whole. Many people on sites such as Facebook believe that the stolen items did not belong to the British museum in the first place and, instead, belonged to the countries in which they originated.<sup>8</sup> The majority of the stolen items originally came from Greece and other Mediterranean countries and as such, many members of the public believe that they should be returned to their countries of origin. Those commenting on TikTok also have a similar opinion to those on Facebook, with comments on itvnews's post, agreeing that the artefacts stolen from the British Museum were already stolen from their original countries and as such, should be returned to the people that they originally belonged to.<sup>9</sup> However, while the general public that are flocking to Facebook and TikTok might be of the opinion that these stolen artefacts should be returned to their original countries, the people of Instagram seem to be of a differing opinion. On a post by Viceuk, the comments are filled with people rallying to defend the British museum and the series of events that led to the museum obtaining these artefacts.<sup>10</sup> This clearly shows that the general public are in disagreement over the stolen artefacts and whether they should be returned to Greece and other such countries, or whether they have now become the property of the British Museum.

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<sup>6</sup> Harriet Sherwood, *British Museum says 626 items lost or stolen have been found*, (2024) < <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/article/2024/may/17/british-museum-items-lost-or-stolen-found>> [accessed 30 September 2024].

<sup>7</sup> Jo Lawson-Tancred, *British Museum Recovers Nearly Half of Its 1,500 Missing Objects*, (2024) < <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/british-museum-recovery-program-2489764#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThrough%20clever%20detective%20work%20and,items%20that%20we%20could%20recover.%E2%80%9D>> [accessed 30 September 2024].

<sup>8</sup> BBC News, 'If you are concerned' [Facebook] < [https://www.facebook.com/story.php/?story\\_fbid=751880510309277&id=100064620046507&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/story.php/?story_fbid=751880510309277&id=100064620046507&_rdr)> 26 September 2023 [accessed 30 September 2024].

<sup>9</sup> itvnews, 'Have you seen treasures like these' [video]. 2023 < <https://www.tiktok.com/@itvnews/video/7283210294854274337>> [accessed 1 October 2024].

<sup>10</sup> viceuk, 'The British Museum' [Instagram], < <https://www.instagram.com/p/CwDCKBmle1g/>> 17 August 2023 [accessed 1 October 2024].

The public are clearly focusing on the history of the artefacts and the meaning behind them and their importance to the cultures and countries that they originated from. However, the newspapers are primarily focussing on the objects as they currently are and their importance to the museum. The general public are interacting with the papers online through social media, attempting to convey their opinions on the stolen artefacts and opening up a debate around the ethics of the British Museum keeping the artefacts.

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