

A Museum report based on a virtual tour of the British Museum in London in comparison to attending in person, considering how the museum promotes public understanding of the archaeological record.



Image 1: The British Museum (Own Image 29-09-2023).

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Humanities.

Abstract

At a conference in 2014, the President of the American Alliance of Museums, Ford W Bell, stated that Museums are 'essential centres of learning' that should 'meet the needs of every child, to inspire the next generation of Innovators and thinkers' (American Alliance of Museums, 2014; Bell, 2014). With 'over 6 million local and international visitors every year' and 'over 24 million online visits during 2011-2012' (British Museum, 2019b), the British Museum virtual tour creates opportunities for those who visit the Museum and those unable to physically attend the Museum itself to access information relating to each object within the archaeological record in each room, collection and gallery, on a device such as a phone, iPad or laptop (British Museum, 2024j; Lucas, 2012).

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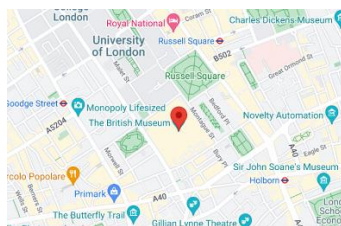
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Introduction

I chose to investigate the British Museum's online virtual tour due to a recent visit to the British Museum in London (Maps 1 and 2) to conduct some research, enabling me to compare the overall process of both the virtual and physical visits. This report will consider the experience, engagement, and ease of navigation through the museum, its links to activities within and outside of the Museum and the benefits of the collections being online whilst also considering how the museum promotes public understanding of the archaeological record.



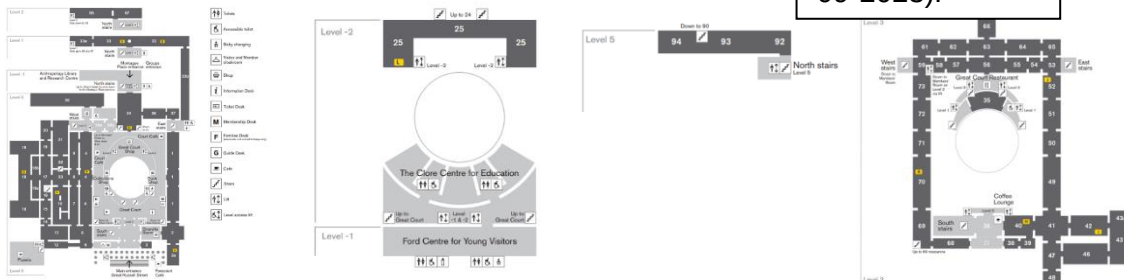
Image 2: Inside the British Museum (Own Image 29-09-2023).



Map 1: The British Museum, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG, England, UK (British Museum, 2024k).



Image 3: Egyptian Statue near to the Rosetta Stone (Own Image 29-09-2023).



Map 2: Floor plans (The British Museum, 2024h).

The British Museum (Images 1 and 2) was the first known national Museum in the World and the first British public institution. 'Due to an Act of Parliament in 1753', the 'King's Collection' was established for all the People of the World' to access and was governed by trustees. Regulations changed in the 1830s allowing the Museum to open longer and give free entry to anyone that could get there. The days when all visitors had to apply in writing for tickets with limited visiting hours restricted to well-connected visitors on personal tours of the collections by the trustees and curators were over. The British Museum is funded by government grant-in-aid, earned income from exhibitions, consultancies, trading, publishing, hospitality and

training, gifts from sponsors and other benefactors, donations, membership, and an online shop (British Museum, 2024g).

Purpose of the Museum:

The British Museum is a 'place of scholarly inquiry' for anyone in the world, 'existing to promote knowledge and understanding' 'whilst exploring the past through archaeology, anthropology, art, history and scientific examination', recruiting leading experts from all around the world 'the Museum aims to be 'accessible', 'explorable', and 'enjoyable' to all, 'creating community' 'cohesion and understanding', 'domestically and internationally' (The British Museum, 2019b).

The type of archaeological record the British Museum displays

The Museum has 'over eight million objects housed over three locations' with over two million years of history, including collections from the earliest humans up to the present day from most areas of the World. Not claiming the collection to be complete, it demonstrates an 'understanding' of 'how humanity has experienced, shaped, understood and imagined the world' within the archaeological record (The British Museum, 2019a; The British Museum, 2019b). The museum's first-ever collections are housed in room one, the "Enlightenment Gallery which covers the period of discovery between c.1680 and 1820 AD (British Museum, 2024i). The eighteenth century was an era of travel, 'discovery', 'knowledge', 'European colonialism', and the 'transatlantic slave trade' which whilst making Britain wealthy, also changed the way the World was perceived (British Museum 2024d) creating an enthusiasm to 'study human societies through time and across the world' (The British Museum, 2019b). With over sixty galleries including "Clocks and Watches (rooms 38-39), Medieval Europe (room 40), ancient Iran (room 52) and Chinese Ceramics in room 95, the landing page also has highlights that make it easier to choose which gallery to visit with their room numbers and the countries they represent. Two million of the eight million objects are available online and objects not on public display are available through the research libraries in each department with two of the galleries specifically designed as virtual galleries (British Museum, 2024a; British Museum, 2024e).

How the virtual tour relates to other events or reports

The linking pages to the collections allow access to experts and guests through blogs, podcasts, YouTube, and social media, and have been created due to a demand for the expertise of the Museum's curators (The British Museum, 2019b). There are also links to

Soundcloud, some objects in The British Sign Language multimedia guide, and sign language films accessible from your phone (British Museum 2024d), ArtRemix which uses AI to remix objects into something else, games, puzzles, gallery audio guides, Museum missions which uses the free Wi-Fi at the Museum to help find objects in the gallery, whilst you perform a video, discuss objects, look closer at the collection highlights, and conduct a photo shoot (British Museum, 2024i). Outside the Museum, touring exhibitions and long-term loan programs in the UK and Worldwide allow approximately two million people outside the UK to view the collections (The British Museum, 2019b).

Virtual Exhibition Methods

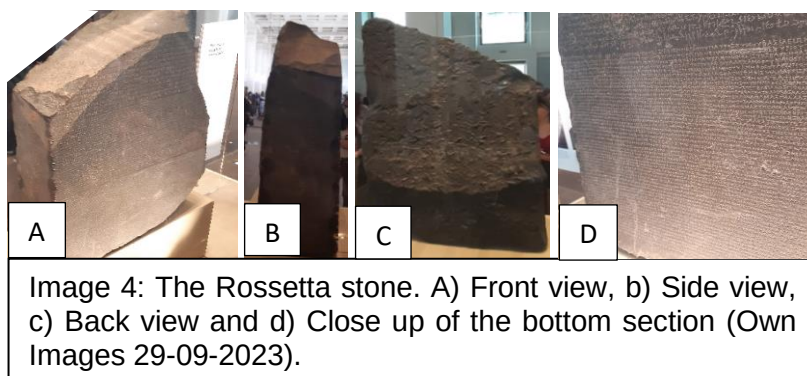
No blurry Images or people you do not know standing in front of you, tour groups with preferential treatment pushing past, or loud chatter in a multitude of languages crossing over like fighter jets on a low-flying training exercise. I was excited to try out the British Museum virtual tour as I had already visited the Museum and was keen to compare the two experiences. The virtual tour in the “British Museum from home” link uses Street View to tour the galleries, The site has well-designed landing pages with links to tour routes, images of the objects, how to book tickets, opening hours, maps, resources, research, blogs, podcasts, YouTube channel, social media, how to support the museum financially, searching the collection, attending online events, children’s activities and much more (British Museum, 2024a). As with anything new, it took a bit of time getting used to the navigation. It was difficult to view the information on the wall posters and to get around the back of some of the objects such as in Image 3. Being able to see the ceilings was great however the lights interfered with their beauty rather than highlighting them. Even though the Museum is free to enter once you have booked your time slot for the day it is time-consuming and can be expensive if you live outside of London. I did not have time to see everything in the Museum in time that I had, and I was exhausted, however, I did not feel disappointed as the virtual tour online covered the whole museum enabling me to browse the other collections in my own time, as well as re-visit the ones I had seen. The British Museum Online Virtual Tour and its related information can be viewed from anywhere and at any time with internet signal and Wi-Fi or mobile data.

How collections are exhibited

Underlined words such as collections, and newsletter) takes you to a page where you can access various other pages such as the online guide, search bars for different fields and keywords to find anything in the museum that you know you would like to see or to explore in the galleries and full collections. Displaying images of an object from each collection alongside the collection title such as “Egypt death and afterlife” or “Korea” as well as room numbers), it also has the Museum's story and how the objects came into the collection and some background information about the Museum (British Museum, 2024i).

The virtual tour of the Egyptian sculptures takes you to the room with the Rosetta stone. Tiles below take you to different sections of the tour, where you have to click and hold the mouse down whilst being able to scroll to either side. Once you have scrolled as far as you can go you have to click the mouse which then takes you closer to the object you clicked on. You can then zoom in to get a closer look at the details of each sculpture, picture quality seemed a little grainy and I could not read the cards under some of the statues even after zooming in and you still get the reflections in the glass. The writing in the white boxes takes you to an information page with great-quality images into which you can zoom in (British Museum, 2024c).

Rosetta stone example



Shown in images 4 a-d, the Rosetta stone has a decree written in Demotic, Greek, and Hieroglyphs, the forgotten language of priests (British Museum, 2024f). I was lucky enough to get right next to the

Rosetta stone during my visit, however, after examining the stone for a few minutes I was suddenly surrounded by a large tour group, and my view of it quickly became obscured. The virtual tour with just the objects and no large tour groups taking up a lot of space and getting preferential treatment was great, although I did not immediately gain a sense of the grandeur that I got standing in front of the stone in the Museum itself. I was hoping to be able to zoom into the case beyond the glass to examine the inscriptions up close as all the photographs I took during my visit had sun reflections on them. Although this was not possible in “The Top

Ten Treasures in the British Museum” an in-depth Museum Tour in “The Museum Guide” enables you to view a copy of the Rosetta stone up close (British Museum, 2024f).

The benefit of being online



Image 5: The Gebelein man from Egypt (c.3500 BCE) at the British Museum (Own Image, 29-09-2024).

It is time-consuming and expensive if you live outside of London. I did not have time to see everything in the time that I had, however, I did not feel disappointed as I was exhausted, and the virtual tour covers the whole museum enabling me to browse the collections in my own time. The Virtual tour did not give the full experience of physically seeing the collections, the reality of seeing a body such as the Gebelein man from Egypt known as ‘Ginger’ (Image 5) (Friedman et. al., 2018) with hair and skin up close is much different than through the virtual tour, which felt almost like it had an invisible barrier that was protecting my mind from what was actually before me, restraining my inquisitive mind

to slightly more focused thoughts. The Online virtual tour and the Museum visits help people to stay connected, creating conversations to develop ideas. Comprehensively explaining how their collections have been acquired, developed, and even contested the online virtual visit allows research to be conducted outside of Museum hours and enhances the experience to a broader audience, allowing people who are unable to physically mentally or emotionally attend the Museums to engage with all the collections in their own time.

Comparison between the Physical Museum and Virtual Tour

The museum has a large print guide and a sensory map, sensory-friendly spaces, temperature, clearly marked facilities, and highlighted areas that are easier to see. It is great to look at before you go to be able to know where what interests you, saving time and reducing the disappointment of not getting to see what you went there for I did not have a chance to go into the Korean gallery as it was too full in there so the online tour was the next best thing, however as I had not previously seen the objects as I had in the Egyptian galleries the whole tour of the gallery felt empty as I had nothing to remind me of what I had read and seen in the museum which meant that the words that I could not read on the objects that I had seen did not matter as much as not being able to see what it said on the objects I had not seen as I was attaching associated memories as I was looking around bringing it more to life. Comparing the two experiences I felt that I had viewed the objects more than the information in the museum

itself and that during the virtual tour, I was stopping to read the various pages of information, however, it would take a lifetime to examine all the information relating to the objects if I was to do that with each one.

Conclusion

The virtual tour is a valuable tool in aiding the British Museum with its aims to be accessible to all by extending its services within the Museum as well as to the outside world. Allowing more people to conduct research from the descriptions, displays, and discussions to gain a better understanding of how humanity has experienced, shaped, understood and imagined the world. Information on the collections can be more comprehensive and inclusive whilst promoting the public's understanding of the archaeological record.

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