

Looting the Looters: Theft at the British Museum

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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What happens when the looters are looted? Perhaps that strange sense of satisfaction called justice, an offence cancelled by another. One therefore greets the realisation that the British Museum has been suffering a number of such cases with some smugness. What makes them even more striking is the inability of staff to have picked up on the matter in the first place. When they did come to light, the habitual tendency to bury, or deny matters as best as possible, also found form.

On August 16, the British Museum [stated in a press release](#) that an independent review into its security was being launched "after items from the collection were found to be missing, stolen or damaged." The extent of such theft or damage is not clear, though the Museum revealed that one member of staff had been dismissed, with legal action being taken against the unnamed individual. The Metropolitan Police, through its Economic Crime Command branch, was also investigating the matter.

Led by former trustee, Sir Nigel Boardman, and Lucy D'Orsi, Chief Constable of the British Transport Police, the review is intended to furnish the Museum with "recommendations regarding future security arrangements" while also commencing "a vigorous programme to recover the missing items."

Short on detail, the Museum gave some sense about the items involved, which were, it was keen to point out, "kept primarily for academic and research purposes." These included "gold jewellery and gems of semi-precious stones and glass dating from the 15th century BC to the 19th century AD."

Officials have been keen to contain the scandal, with director Hartwig Fischer insisting that this was "highly unusual". In apologising for the whole affair, he also [assured](#) the public that "we have now brought an end to this – and we are determined to put things right." Fischer's own occupancy of the director's role is also coming to an end in 2024.

The Chair of the Museum, George Osborne, formerly Chancellor of the Exchequer, even saw

an opportunity to weave the theft into a strategy of reforming the institution. “This incident only reinforces the case for the reimagination of the Museum we have embarked upon.”

The person who seems to have spurred such reimagining was subsequently identified as Peter John Higgs, a curator of Greek antiquities of some prominence. There is a delicious irony in this, given the fraught history the Museum has had with the Elgin Marbles, so brazenly taken from the Parthenon in Athens by the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in 1801.

Much the same could be said about many artefacts housed in the BM’s collections, including the Benin bronzes and the Easter Island Hoa Hakananai’a. As the notable human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson [sourly remarked](#) in 2019, “The trustees of the British Museum have become the world’s largest receivers of stolen property, and the great majority of their loot is not even on public display.”

What has since emerged is that the Museum has been less than frank about the spate of pilfering, let alone the number of items missing from its inventory. One [report](#) suggests that the number might be anywhere between 1,500 to 2,000, taken over a period of two decades.

Publicity is being made about the artefacts through official channels without much specificity, which can be taken either as a sign of acute awareness as to where they might be found, or old-fashioned, groping ignorance. Christopher Marinello, lawyer and CEO of Art Recovery International, is of the [latter view](#).

Higgs, it transpires, was sacked on July 5 with barely a murmur, despite having led the 2021 exhibition “[Ancient Greeks: Athletes, Warriors and Heroes](#),” which was received by three Australian museums and slated to arrive in Suzhou Museum in China at the end of the year. The Higgs dismissal took place, it has been reported, for his alleged role behind the disappearance of various gold jewellery, semi-precious stones and glass.

The suspicion here is that Higgs operated stealthily, removing the objects over a number of years. Somewhat odder, and less stealthy, was how many of those objects found their way onto eBay. Prices [also dramatically varied](#), suggesting either a cheeky sense of humour, or the understanding of an untutored eye. One item of Roman jewellery, made from onyx, valued anywhere between £25,000 and £50,000, fetched the less than princely sum of £40.

In 2016, an unnamed antiquities expert cited in a *Telegraph* [report](#) began noting various listings of glass items and semi-precious gems on the e-commerce site. Pieces from the Townley collection of Graeco-Roman artifacts, which the Museum started purchasing in 1805, were spotted under an eBay seller by the name of “sultan1966”. Sultan1966 proved less than forthcoming to the expert in question when confronted about any link to Higgs.

In June 2020, the Museum was informed of the matter. In February 2021, the BBC [revealed](#) that an art dealer by the name of Ittai Gradel had alerted the institution about some of the items being sold online. Deputy director Jonathan Williams took five months to rebuff the claim: “there was no suggestion of any wrongdoing.” An unconvinced Gradel chased up matters with a museum board member, claiming that Williams and Fischer had swept “it all under the carpet.” In October 2022, Fischer repeated the line that “no evidence” of wrongdoing had been identified.

The son of the alleged perpetrator, Greg Higgs, is mightily unimpressed, [declaring](#) that his father could not have been responsible. “He’s lost his job and his reputation, and I don’t think it was fair. It couldn’t have been (him). I don’t think there is even anything missing as far as I’m aware.” The lamentable conduct by the British Museum, notably in initially insisting that nothing had gone missing, would suggest that someone is telling a glorious fib.

The Economist, in reacting to the affair, [suggested](#) that making off with such items from a museum “is easier than you might think.” But what also matters is the museum’s response to alleged claims of theft. As Marinello [puts it](#), instances of pilfering are not unusual, but the British Museum’s failure to involve the police “right away” was nothing short of “shocking”. The Higgs matter suggests as much and is likely to prove a tonic to those seeking a return of various collections lodged in the British Museum over the years.

Lina Mendoni, Greece’s Minister of Culture, is one who wasted little time [suggesting](#) that the missing objects reinforced “the permanent and just demand of our country for the definitive return” of the Parthenon Marbles. The fact that the incidents had taken place “from within, beyond any moral and criminal responsibility” questioned “the credibility of the organisation itself.” Such theft has somehow put the universe of looted treasures into greater balance.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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