

Topic Page: [British Museum](#)

Definition: **British Museum** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

One of the world's greatest public collections of art, ethnography, and archaeology (established 1753). Its first displays came from a private collection purchased from the naturalist, Sir Hans Sloane. Later additions included the Rosetta Stone and the Elgin Marbles. The present building by Sir Robert Smirke was completed in 1847.

Summary Article: **British Museum**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

the national repository in London for treasures in science and art. Located in the Bloomsbury section of the city, it has departments of antiquities, prints and drawings, coins and medals, and ethnography. The museum was established by act of Parliament in 1753 when the collection of Sir Hans Sloane, begun in the previous century and called the Cabinet of Curiosities, was purchased by the government and was joined with the Cotton collection (see Cotton, Sir Robert Bruce) and the Harleian Library (see also Harley, Robert). In 1757 the royal library was given to the museum by George II.

The museum was opened in 1759 under its present name in Montague House, but the acquisition of the library of George III in 1823 necessitated larger quarters. The first wing of the new building was completed in 1829, the quadrangle in 1852, and the great domed Reading Room in 1857. Later, other additions were built. Long a part of the museum, the British Library was established as a separate entity by act of Parliament in 1973 and moved to new London quarters in 1997. After the relocation of the library, the famous Reading Room underwent extensive renovations, including the opening (2000) of a surrounding glassed-in Great Court and the installation of a billowing transparent roof, both designed by Lord Norman Foster. The space houses a gallery and a restaurant, as well as two small theaters and an education center beneath the courtyard.

The museum's collection of prints and drawings is one of the finest in the world. The natural history collection was transferred (1881–83) to buildings in South Kensington and called the Natural History Museum. One of the major exhibits of the Egyptian department is the granitoid slab known as the Rosetta Stone (see under Rosetta). The Greek treasures include the Elgin Marbles and a caryatid from the Erechtheum. The museum's special collections include a vast number of clocks and timepieces, ivories, and the Sutton Hoo treasure.

See Crook, J. M. , *The British Museum* (1972);.

Treasures of the British Museum (1972);.

Miller, E. , *That Noble Cabinet* (1974);.

Wilson, D. , ed., *The Collections of the British Museum* (1989).

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