

The Enlightenment, the British Museum, and the British Empire

Relevant to

Modules on the British Empire in the early nineteenth century; the Enlightenment, gender history, history of race

Also to thinking about public history (i.e. history as it is presented not in academic books, but in museums, galleries, etc.)

Background

The Enlightenment period (from the late 17th century to the early 19th century) is thought of as the period when scientists, explorers and thinkers used reason, observation and experimentation to learn about and analyse the natural world as well as human history and human societies. Enlightenment thinkers saw themselves as developing a new way of thinking about the world and society.

Enlightenment ideas were spread by books, newspapers, and lectures. The concept of a museum, which was used to display objects of natural history, was adopted during this period.

The British Museum was one such museum. Today, it still has a gallery called the Enlightenment Gallery, devoted to telling the story of the Enlightenment by displaying objects that Enlightenment figures collected, analysed, and donated to the museum.

In this lecture (<https://royalhistsoc.org/podcast-6-december-2019-professor-margot-finn-presidential-address-material-turns-in-british-history-iii-collecting/>), Professor Margot Finn looks at Case 15 in the Enlightenment Gallery, which contains archaeological finds excavated by Claudius Rich (1786-1821) and his wife Mary (1789-1876). They collected items from Bombay, Basra, Baghdad and Babylon for the East India Company. Many of the items they collected from excavations of Nineveh and Babylon can be found displayed in case 15 of the Enlightenment Gallery.

Questions to think about

[Listen to the lecture from 00:00-13:10]

What role did Mary and her younger sister, Kitty Mackintosh, play in the collecting of items?

Why is it important to remember the involvement of women and other people unaccounted for such as servants and slaves?

- x How would you change the text accompanying the objects in the Enlightenment Gallery and why?

Further resources

Look around the Enlightenment Gallery of the British Museum, and look inside its cases, here:

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/enlightenment#take-a-virtual-tour>.

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