

# Could What Happened to the British Museum Happen to our Museums?

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*The museum world was shocked by the British Museum's announcement in 2023 that a member of staff had stolen and sold an estimated 2,000 objects from their collection for over a decade. In this essay, Alvin Tan and John Teo examine the impact of this incident, review the safeguards that the National Heritage Board and its collecting institutions have in place for the National Collection, and suggest ways to mitigate future risks.*

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In August 2023, the museum world was rocked by news from the British Museum that it had dismissed an unnamed employee and that the police were investigating “missing, stolen or damaged” items, mainly from its research collection. Subsequent reports identified the employee as senior curator Peter Higgs, and, over the next few months, the bad press for the museum continued with revelations on how some of the items had been sold on eBay for a fraction of their value, with fingers pointing at the museum's poor and incomplete record-keeping and lack of proper security. The stolen objects were mainly small gems and items of gold jewellery from the ancient Mediterranean world, but there were standout pieces too, including two Roman glass gems: an intaglio with a profile of Minerva and a cameo decorated with Cupid, dating from the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

What was perhaps more troubling was the revelation that early warning signs had been ignored by the museum's senior management. The thefts had first been brought to the British Museum's attention back in February 2021, when Danish art dealer Dr Ittal Gradel had contacted the museum with a dossier of evidence of what appeared to be items from their collection for sale on eBay. Gradel had not been the

sole informant. Other individuals had come forth with similar claims but these had allegedly been disregarded by the British Museum. It was only more than two years later that Higgs was sacked following investigations by the Metropolitan Police, and the British Museum then issued a statement admitting it “did not respond as comprehensively as it should have.”

The investigation culminated in the resignation of Director Hartwig Fischer, but the reputational damage to the august institution was already considerable. It also resulted in renewed calls for artefact repatriation from countries such as China, Greece and India, with critics arguing that “if the museum can't safeguard its treasures, perhaps they should be returned to their places of origin.”

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## Too Little, Too Late?

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Since then, attempts have been made to recover the missing objects and restore public trust in the national institution. In September 2023, the museum launched a webpage<sup>1</sup> to gather information from the public on the stolen objects, and enlisted the help of Art Loss Register, Interpol, and the Metropolitan Police to try to locate and retrieve the estimated 2,000 missing objects. To date, 626 objects have been recovered, and a further 100 objects identified. However, some critics have questioned the usefulness of the webpage, which provides neither a detailed list of the missing objects nor their actual images, but merely states the types of missing objects, coupled with images of similar, but not actual, items.

The British Museum also embarked on an independent review to tighten its record-keeping



**Figure 1.** Intaglio with profile bust of Minerva or Athena in black glass with white band, Roman 1<sup>st</sup> century BC-1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Image courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

and security, and issued a press statement in December 2023 declaring that over a third of the published recommendations from the review were already underway or completed. One of the recommendations outlined an ambitious plan to complete the documentation and digitisation of the museum's entire collection<sup>2</sup> within the next five years. Separately in February 2024, the British Museum launched its "Rediscovering Gems" special exhibition which featured dozens of small artefacts known as cameos and intaglios. Perhaps as a gesture towards transparency and addressing public curiosity, 10 of the artefacts on display were recovered items.

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## Could This Happen to Singapore?

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In the wake of the thefts at the British Museum, it would be remiss for museums worldwide not to ask themselves: "Could what happened to the British Museum happen to us?" and "What could we learn from the British Museum's systemic failings?"

At this juncture, we can offer an overview of the security and collections management measures that have been put in place by the institutions managed by the National Heritage Board<sup>3</sup> (NHB) and the Visual Arts Cluster (VAC)<sup>4</sup>, and reflect on the complex issues involving museum collections and their storage, records and safekeeping. Objects displayed in permanent galleries are part of the National Collection and subjected to stringent security measures, with guards, gallery sitters, intrusion detection systems, 24/7 CCTV surveillance, and centralised alarm monitoring systems in place, alongside restricted access and authentication readers. Objects not on display are stored in museum stores or at the Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC).

At both the museums and HCC, there are CCTV cameras installed at main ingress/egress points. In some of the major institutions, these CCTVs are equipped with analytical capabilities to expedite criminal investigations if required via forensic analysis of facial recognition and physical features/accessories. NHB is also looking into upgrading all the CCTVs in the remaining institutions with such analytics capabilities.

Furthermore, access to the abovementioned storage facilities is restricted to authorised staff, while all external guests and vendors are accompanied by staff at all times. Additional security features like facial recognition readers and restricted access methods such as access cards, biometric readers, and physical keys have been implemented for heightened protection.

More importantly, every object in the National Collection is individually catalogued, Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tagged, and documented. As part of NHB's National Collection policies, 100% stock-takes for all objects in the collection are conducted every one to two years. These stock-takes utilise the Automated Collections Tagging System (ACTS) which captures all movement of objects within HCC (e.g. from the stores to the conservation labs), and between the museums and HCC, and ensures thorough oversight of the National Collection.<sup>5</sup>

The saga of missing items at the British Museum also highlighted the importance of documentation and digitalisation, given the apt reminders that “items they have no record of are as good as gone” (Wilding 2024). Fortunately, NHB has catalogued all the objects in the National Collection in the Singapore Collections Museum System (SCMS). This system captures images of and critical information about each object from acquisition to accessioning, as well

as the conservation treatment it received etc. SCMS has a strict access rights management system, with only a select few staff members authorised to delete object records.

Having said that, it should be noted that museums' research and/or handling collections, whether donated or purchased, are not subjected to the same level of security scrutiny, and are also not individually catalogued in SCMS. These objects are used for museum programmes, but are not part of the National Collection. Rather, they are maintained by museums primarily for outreach and education purposes. As such, they are expected to be handled by members of the public and/or researchers, and eventually disposed of when they wear out and/or are damaged.

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## The Importance of Documentation

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Since the news broke about the British Museum, there have been reports on several other museums in the UK where hundreds of items from their collections have likewise been lost, stolen or destroyed over the past five years. These include the Imperial War Museum, National Museum of Scotland and Natural History Museum. This problem had seemed largely unknown to the public since the vast majority of their collections are kept in storage. In an ideal world, all the objects in these collections should be documented, catalogued, and made publicly accessible, but that is most often not the case.



**Figure 2.** HCC officer scanning a RFID tag attached to an object from the National Collection, 2024. Image courtesy of Heritage Conservation Centre.

When we compare the British Museum's collection to Singapore's National Collection, it is worth noting that there are crucial differences, especially in terms of the size and value of the collections. Our National Collection comprises just over 250,000 objects while the British Museum's collection amounts to an estimated eight million objects, of which 80,000 (about 1%) are on display at the museum in Bloomsbury. In addition, while the handling collections in our institutions often comprise objects of relatively low monetary value, the British Museum's research collection may comprise objects which, in a modest museum, might constitute star pieces.

Nonetheless, there are useful insights to be gleaned from the case study of the British Museum in the four areas of **deterrence, detection, documentation and digitalisation**. The first two Ds of deterrence and detection refer to the security measures that museums have or should put in place to deter thefts both in the galleries and in the stores, as well as to detect acts of theft and their perpetrators.

The third and fourth Ds of documentation and digitalisation are focused on the twin issues of proper cataloguing of collections and the establishment of an up-to-date database. They deal with the real and often overlooked task of caring for museum collections which can amount to millions of objects accrued over several centuries. Many of us in the sector hope that advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) technology have the potential to revolutionise cataloguing and collections management, given the onerous and time-consuming nature of reviewing and digitalising inventory and factual information.

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## The Human Factor

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Thus far, reports have predominantly focused on the institution's weak security measures and poor



**Figure 3.** “ACM Adventures—Topsy Turvy Tea Party” featuring objects from its handling collection of Peranakan porcelain, 2022. Image courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum/The Peranakan Museum.

inventory management as major contributing factors to the thefts at the British Museum. But late last year, the institution also acknowledged the importance of effective human resource policies and practices. It recognised the need to enhance its HR department and seek external guidance, especially where the museum did not have the relevant expertise (for example, legal advice or the handling of complaints). It further emphasised the importance of greater board committee oversight of staff matters, including access to exit interview notes.

The thefts at the British Museum also underscored the fundamental responsibility of curators and museum staff to act with integrity. Museums should refine their recruitment and induction processes to prioritise character assessments and core competencies centered on ethical behaviour. New hires should also be acquainted with the International Council Of Museums’ ethical code, emphasising adherence to professional standards and laws, and an understanding of illegal or unethical professional conduct. However, no recruitment process can

ever be foolproof, and, as such, museums should conduct regular training to ingrain in employees the museum’s code of conduct.

Museums should also put in place whistleblower policies to encourage staff to report suspicious activities without fear of reprisal. If confronted with potential theft cases, museums should have in place a well-thought-through suspension policy which will allow them to conduct a fair investigation. This is particularly important in instances where the presence of the employee might be a hindrance.

Besides robust human resource policies and practices, museums could also look into improving their core digital infrastructure, and preparing staff for the adoption and deployment of AI technology. Training in data management, rights and compliance, and AI systems and risks appears increasingly critical. Museums should also pay close attention to learning how to integrate AI into museum operations, as well as weigh AI’s impact on existing and future jobs.

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## Conclusion: Food For Further Thought

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The case of the British Museum serves as timely reminder that museums worldwide must put in place the necessary policies, practices, controls and reviews. For Singapore's institutions specifically, the case also underscores the importance of proper collections management, robust internal security measures, ethical conduct amongst staff, clear whistleblower policies, forward-looking workforce planning and development, and a well-defined crisis response plan.

Yet, despite all that has been said and done, two fundamental issues are harder to resolve. Firstly, at the institutional level, there is the perennial issue pertaining to the “funnelling of energy and expertise into blockbuster exhibitions at the expense of drearier custodial duties” (Lawson-Tancred 2023). In Singapore, we will need to ensure we keep the momentum on documentation and strengthening internal processes, even as we think about increasing museum visitorship and public outreach.

Secondly, some countries are facing declining museum funding<sup>6</sup> which has resulted in redundancies, a loss of expertise, and fewer checks and balances within the organisation. Singapore's public museums are fortunately well-funded by the government and our patrons, but, in a time of fiscal tightness, this should not be taken for granted.

In the final analysis, operating in a world of finite and shrinking resources, the museum world could

do well with a re-thinking or re-balancing of the strategic priorities of museums. A return to basics seems timely, focussing on the proper stewardship of the collections, and providing the necessary manpower and funding support for the care of these collections which museums hold for the benefit of our current and future generations. □

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## About the Authors



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## Notes

1. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/departments/recovery-missing-items>.
2. In the case of the British Museum, it has been reported that, out of its collection of eight million objects, an estimated 2.4 million objects are “uncatalogued or partially catalogued” (Razall 2024).
3. The institutions managed by NHB include National Museum of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum, The Peranakan Museum, Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, Malay Heritage Centre, Indian Heritage Centre, Reflections at Bukit Chandu, Changi Chapel Museum, Children’s Museum Singapore and Heritage Conservation Centre.
4. The institutions under VAC include National Gallery Singapore, Singapore Art Museum and Singapore Tyler Print Institute.
5. HCC also conducts regular workshops on collections care and management for the Museum Roundtable as well as for NHB’s ASEAN counterparts, as part of efforts to strengthen the museum and heritage ecosystem.
6. The study commissioned by the Arts Council England on levels of public funding in museums in the UK over the past 15 years revealed a significant decline of approximately 23% in real terms with an inflation-adjusted decrease of 42% (DC Research 2024).



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