

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, TV, radio, country houses, statues, and other such 'public' sites)

Background

The Enlightenment period (from the late 17th century to the early 19th century) is thought of as the great 'Age of Reason', a time 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 'universal' knowledge and promoted new 'universal' museums which they hoped would encourage the masses, too, to adopt 'reason' and cast off 'ignorance' and 'superstition'. These were thought of as 'universal' museums, and the British Museum was one such museum. Today, it still has a gallery called the Enlightenment Galley, 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 Galley, 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]

- How did Kant define the Enlightenment? And what criticisms have been made of Kant's claims to be the champion of universal reason?
- Who, and what, does Professor Finn say is absent from the Enlightenment Gallery? Why do you think this is?

[Listen to the lecture from 33:46-50:52]

- What role did Mary and her younger sister, Kitty Mackintosh, play in the collecting of items and helping Claudius' excavations?
- Why do we have little record of Mary's or Kitty's involvement?
- Why is it important to remember the involvement of women and other people unaccounted for – such as servants and slaves – in the history of collecting Enlightenment objects?

[Listen to the lecture from 52:45 to the end]

- How would you change the text accompanying the objects in the Enlightenment Galley 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>.

See some of the British Library's holdings that relate to the Enlightenment here:
<https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/the-enlightenment>.

Neil MacGregor (British Museum director 2002-2015) covered the 'European Age of Enlightenment' rather differently in his 'History of the World in 100 Objects', emphasising exploitation, slavery and colonialism alongside exploration and Enlightenment. Listen to the 5 episodes looking at this period here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00tnklj/episodes/player>.