



## Looted treasures returned to Afghanistan by British Museum



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The British Museum, aided by British police and the UK Border Force, has helped return to Afghanistan hundreds of looted antiquities seized from smugglers, *The Independent* can reveal.

David Cameron will announce in Afghanistan today that 850 treasures have been repatriated, having been passed to the British Museum for safeguarding following their confiscation in Britain over the last two years.

A spectacular second-century sculpture of the Buddha, exquisite first-century ivories and delicate Bactrian Bronze Age cosmetics containers are among treasures that reflect the rich heritage of a land that was once a crossroads of Eastern and Western civilisations. Their combined value is thought to be around £1m.

Last week, in a secret operation, the entire collection was despatched on two military planes to the Afghan national museum in Kabul, which is desperate to rebuild its holdings. Up to 80 per cent of its exhibits were plundered or destroyed during the

Afghan civil war of the 1990s.

Such was the concern about the safety of the antiquities that The Independent was asked to delay covering their return until they were back in the Kabul museum. Bronze Age carvings and 1,000-year-old Islamic metalwork are among the objects confiscated at British airports, including Birmingham and Manchester.

These cases reflect a global trade that exploits Afghanistan's decades of war to smuggle its heritage abroad for profit. Recent research by Unesco found that thousands of ancient pieces are smuggled through the country's porous borders every year.

Some of the treasures were destined for the British art market. Others stopped off in the UK in transit, it is believed. The Metropolitan Police Art and Antiques Unit has been involved in the investigations. No arrests have been made so far.

Last week, a suicide bomber killed more than a dozen guests at a wedding in northern Afghanistan – the latest violent attack within the country.

But despite the ongoing risks, Afghanistan's curators felt that they were now ready to be reunited with their antiquities. They have created a new display on Buddhism, where the repatriated Buddha sculpture will receive pride of place.

Last year, an anonymous British dealer collaborated with the British Museum to buy and repatriate that sculpture after recognising it as an important antiquity that had been stolen from the Kabul museum in the 1990s. It had been bought by a Japanese collector, from whom the dealer acquired it with his own money with the purpose of repatriating it to Afghanistan.

St John Simpson, the British Museum's senior curator responsible for the pre-Islamic collections from Iran and Arabia, told The Independent: "We're all in it together as museums and museum curators. I'd like to think that anyone would do the same for us if we were unlucky to suffer major disaster or crisis. It is a liberating moment for our colleagues in Kabul."

Other important repatriated pieces include Begram ivories stolen from the Kabul museum and a 12th-century coin from Bamiyan – site of the Buddhas destroyed by the Taliban.