



MASTERPIECES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM



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The British Museum is home to some of the world's finest and broadest collections, ranging from prehistoric times to the present in ancient and modern cultures around the globe. This attractively designed new book showcases a special selection of 250 of the most beautiful and important objects drawn from right across the Museum, each one with its own fascinating story and strikingly illustrated in full colour.

From the Warren Cup to Dürer's Rhinoceros, the Lewis Chessmen to the Aztec turquoise serpent and the Gayer-Anderson Cat, the iconic objects of the British Museum are here presented in an exciting and accessible new way, highlighting the superb craftsmanship and ingenuity of those who created each of these splendid pieces. Grouped into sections based on cross-cultural themes such as rulers, mythical beasts, dress and the human form, the resulting juxtapositions offer intriguing new insights into these widely varied masterpieces.

Introduced by Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, this is a stunning overview of artistic and cultural achievement around the world.

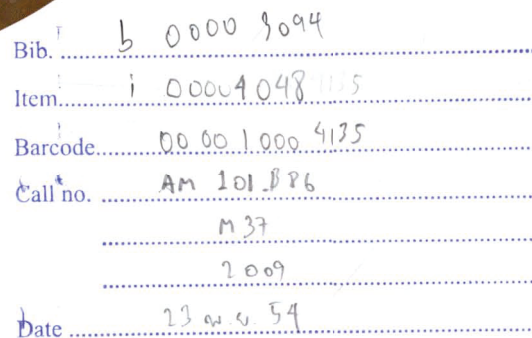
With 280 colour illustrations

£18.99



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HALF-TITLE PAGE *left to right*: mummy coffin (see p. 144);
Lewis chessman (see p. 90); Tara (see p. 39)

FRONTISPIECE: Sutton Hoo helmet (see p. 95)

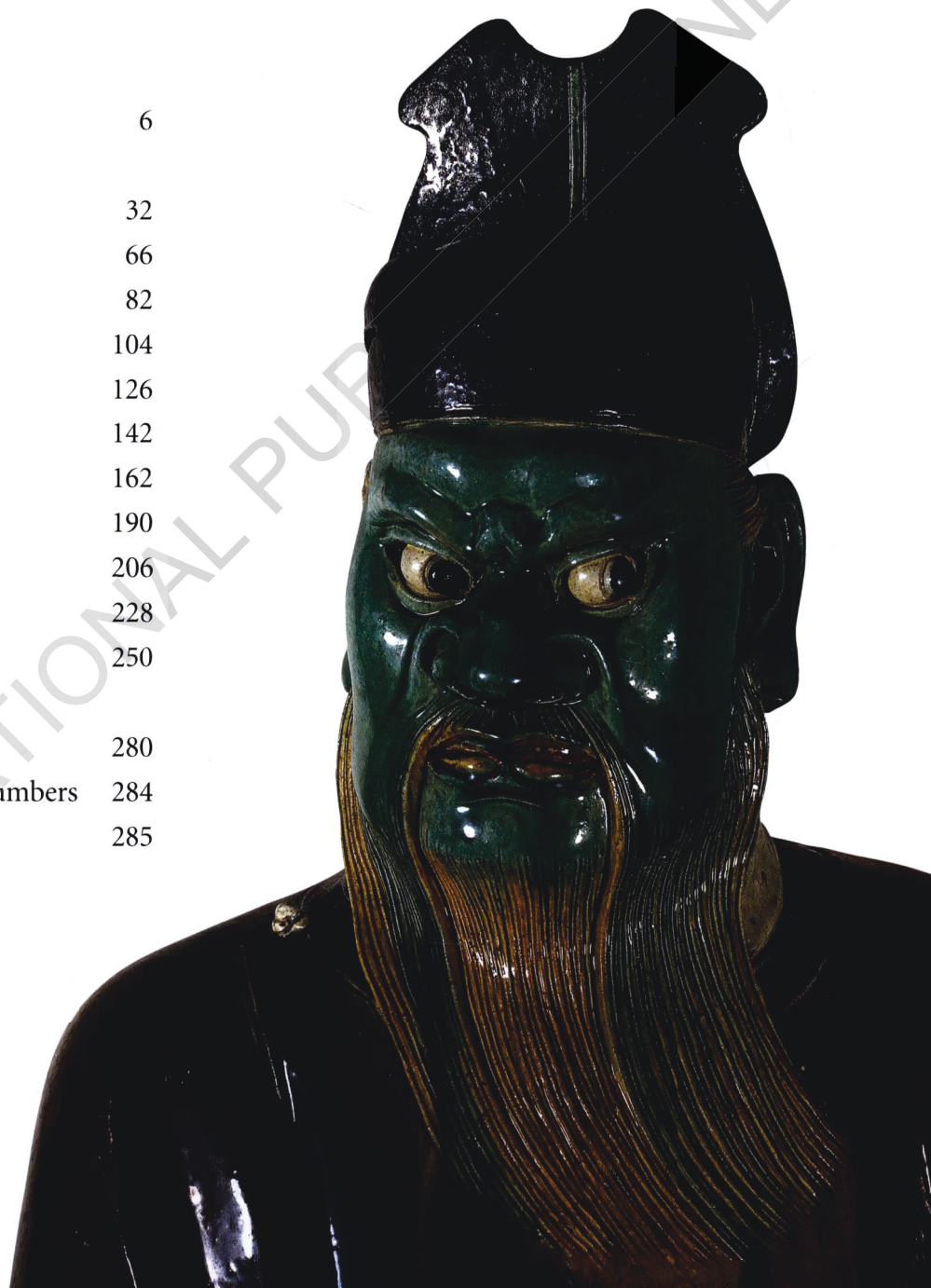
TITLE PAGE: Jade *bi* (see p. 264)

OPPOSITE: Assistant to a Judge of Hell (see p. 153)

Explore the British Museum's collections online at
www.britishmuseum.org

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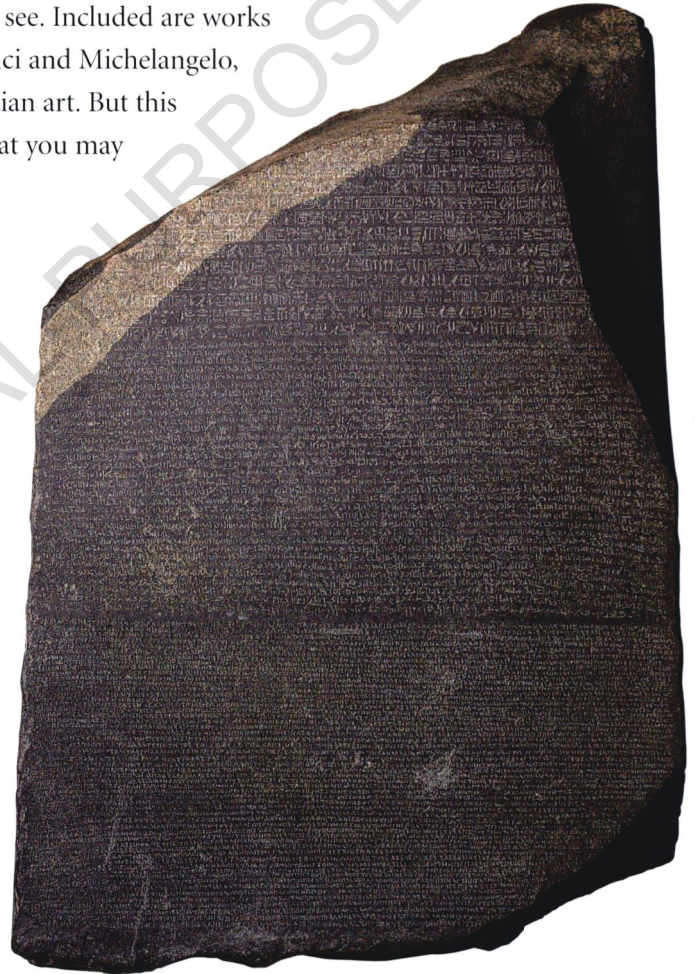
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Director's Introduction

WHAT IS A MASTERPIECE? This book illustrates 250 objects chosen from the vast collection of the British Museum. Some of these are famous pieces such as the Rosetta Stone, images of Egyptian pharaohs and the Sutton Hoo helmet, which are well known across the world and among the objects most visitors to the Museum come to see. Included are works of art by famous artists such as Picasso, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, Greek and Roman statues and works of Chinese and Indian art. But this selection of masterpieces contains many other objects that you may be surprised, even perhaps shocked, to see. Is a fist-sized lump of grey rock really a masterpiece? To explain why this book begins with a grey rock is also to explore the purpose of the British Museum.

For 250 years the British Museum has been open free of charge to all, to enable everybody to explore the histories of the world through things made by peoples from every part of the world, from the beginnings of human culture to the twenty-first century. These range from well-known works of art through to cooking pots and everyday tools. They can allow the visitor to explore the artistic history of a particular culture or period, or its social and political history, or the practicalities of its everyday life. In this sense, though the masterpieces shown here do include objects of great artistic merit, and many are made of precious materials and have taken skill and time to create, others are master pieces of evidence with which to explore our past.



The Rosetta Stone

For this book, 250 objects had to be selected from the tens of thousands that our five million annual visitors can see in our galleries. The Museum is primarily a museum for and about the world, so it is important that people outside London have opportunities to see objects from the Museum's collections. This means there are usually some masterpieces away on loan to exhibitions in other museums across Britain and throughout the world. Others may have been taken off display so that they can be cared for and studied. The Museum exists to increase our understanding of human cultures, and preserving the objects in the Museum and researching them involves about 150 skilled conservators and curators. Ten thousand additional researchers, scholars and students come to study objects in the Museum each year, while the Museum's staff also work with others to carry out expeditions and excavations throughout the world. Some of the Museum's most fragile objects are only ever on display for limited periods, above all to protect them from the damaging effects of light. Fortunately images and information are always available free of charge to all those with access to the internet (www.britishmuseum.org).

By bringing objects together from across the world and from different periods of history, the Museum allows us to explore what divides and unites peoples. This book could have been arranged into predictable chapters such as Egypt, China, India or Europe, for instance. Instead we have chosen to let objects from different times and places speak to each other in ways that demonstrate the range of the Museum's collections and encourage us to think, disagree, occasionally frown and perhaps even laugh. We have chosen to group the objects to illuminate big common themes that resonate across human history, whether it is the use of objects to depict the gods or to legitimize political authority.

Other chapters bring together objects associated with ordinary activities such as eating and drinking, and images that show how the same animal, real or mythical, has been viewed in either similar or very different ways in the past. It is by pointing out the contrasts and similarities between objects, whether made thousands of years apart or at the same time but in different cultures, that the Museum can spark debate and demonstrate again and again not just the enduring connectedness of the world, but above all, our common humanity.



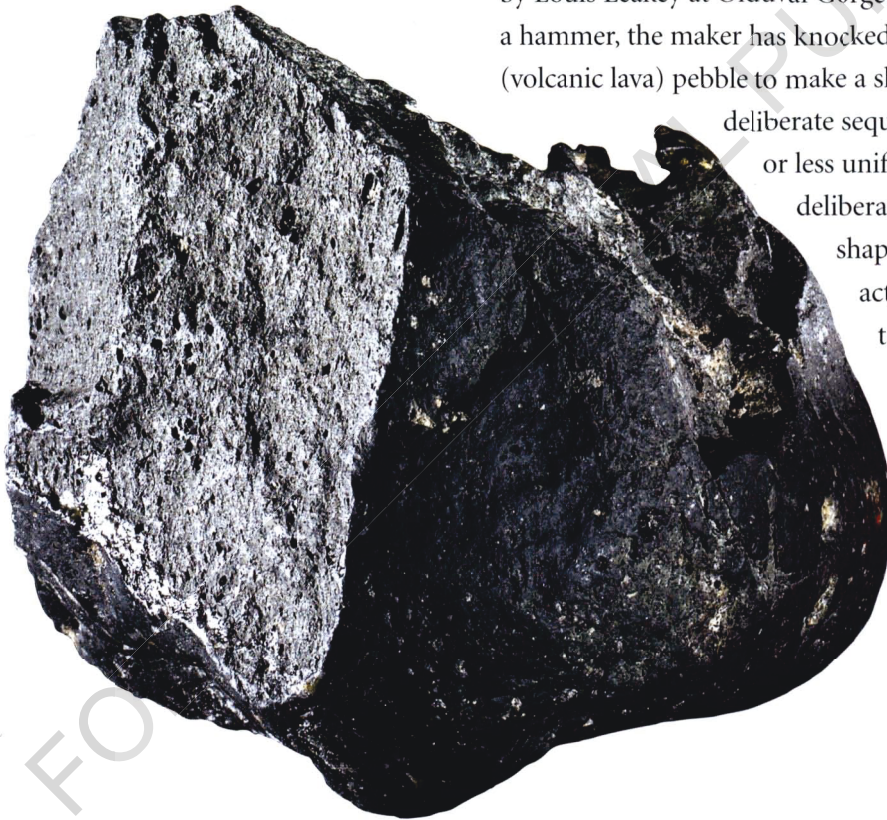
Ancient Egyptian satire, over 3000 years old

Stone chopping tool

THIS CHOPPING TOOL, and others like it, are the oldest objects in the British Museum. Made nearly two million years ago, such stone tools are the oldest surviving objects made by our human ancestors. They are evidence for the beginnings of technology and the use of what makes us human. They are testimony not just that the human species comes from Africa, but that human culture comes from Africa.

This stone tool comes from the site of an early human campsite found by Louis Leakey at Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania. Using another hard stone as a hammer, the maker has knocked flakes off both sides of a basalt (volcanic lava) pebble to make a sharp edge. The edge is formed by a deliberate sequence of skilfully placed blows of more or less uniform force, showing that this is a deliberately made artefact and not an accidental shape. The tool could be used for many activities such as to chop branches from trees, cut meat from large animals or smash bones for marrow fat – an essential part of the early human diet.

*From Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania
Lower Palaeolithic, about 1.8 million years old
Ht 8.7 cm*



El Anatsui (b. 1944), *Bottle-top Textile*

THIS SCULPTURE IS ONE OF the most recently made objects in the British Museum. Visitors are often surprised that the Museum collects objects from our own time, as well as from the past, and collects contemporary works of art. This is a large artwork made from recycled metal bottle tops by the sculptor El Anatsui, who was born in Ghana. He uses modern methods and materials to create traditional objects which then become a powerful medium for conveying social messages. The people of Ghana have for centuries been producing *kente* cloth, textiles made of interwoven cotton or silk strips patterned with designs that represent the status of the wearer.

This sculpture takes the form of the traditional *kente* cloth worn by Ghanaian men but uses bottle tops to comment on how modern consumerism has threatened the survival of these long-established traditions.

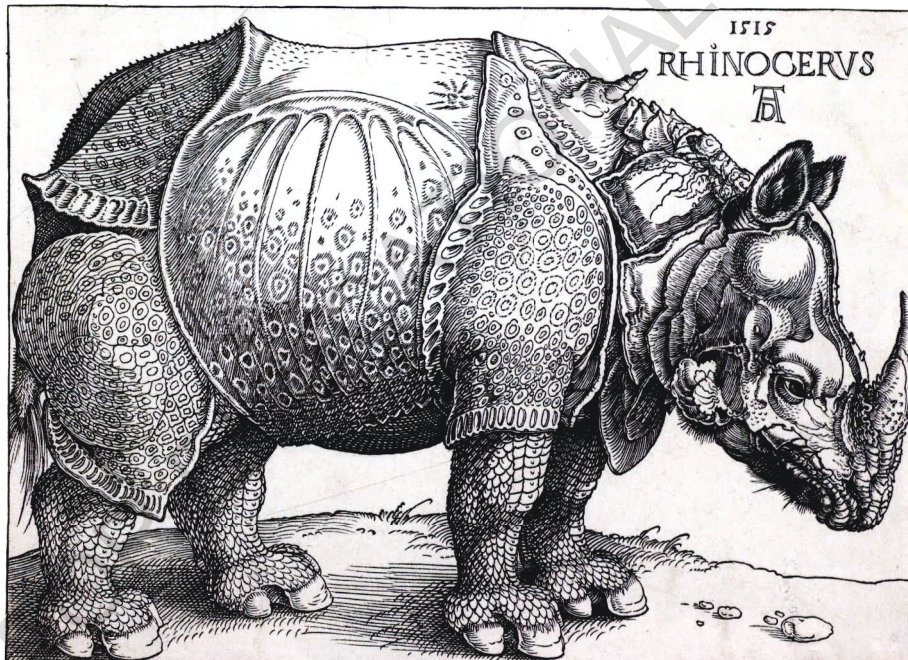
From Ghana, AD 2002
Ht 297 cm



Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), *The Rhinoceros*

BOTH THIS RHINOCEROS and the elephants on the next page were created by artists who had never seen the living animals. The creator of the rhino woodcut, Albrecht Dürer, is well known. We do not know who made the elephants. This celebrated woodcut records the arrival in Lisbon of an Indian rhinoceros on 20 May 1515 as a gift to the king of Portugal.

A description of the rhinoceros soon reached Dürer in Nuremberg, presumably with sketches, from which Dürer prepared this woodcut. It is not an accurate picture of the actual animal, but his fanciful creation proved so convincing that for the next 300 years European illustrators borrowed from his woodcut, even after they had seen living rhinoceroses without plates and scales. It became the image of what people expected a rhinoceros to look like, partly because of Dürer's fame and renown as an artist. This print is one of the most famous of over a million prints and drawings from across the world currently held in the British Museum.



*From Germany, AD 1515
Ht 24.8 cm
Gift of William Mitchell*

Pair of porcelain model elephants

THESE PORCELAIN ELEPHANTS were made by craftsmen in Japan for display on the mantelpieces of European houses half a world away. Like many objects in the British Museum, these exotic elephants are part of a story of the complex links between different parts of the world that over the centuries have led to the movement of ideas, objects and people. Made over 300 years ago, when actual elephants would not have been seen in Japan, these may have been inspired by pictures of Indian processional elephants.

Many such models of animals, including dogs, cats, deer, boars and horses, were made in Japan to be sold in Europe as ornaments. These elephants are decorated in overglaze enamels in the Kakiemon style, in which an opaque white glaze is applied over the clay to give an exquisite milky-white ground (*nigoshide*) that displays the coloured enamel designs to great effect. Reds, greens, blues and yellows were commonly used.

From Japan, Edo period, late 17th century AD

Ht 35.5 cm

Garner Collection



Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8–1543), *Portrait of an English Woman*



THE BRITISH MUSEUM contains thousands of images of people from a huge variety of cultures and periods of history. Few however are actual portraits that attempt to show what a person really looked like. The identity of this woman drawn by the artist Hans Holbein is no longer known, but she was probably a lady from the court of the English king Henry VIII (reigned 1509–47). She is drawn in red and black chalk, with touches of bodycolour to highlight her features. Holbein used black ink on the point of a brush to reinforce the edge of her cap and facial features. Her eyebrows and eyelashes are particularly delicate. The original paper was prepared with a soft pink ground, which suggests her flesh tones. At some stage, however, the drawing was cut out from its original paper and laid down on another sheet, so that the figure is now silhouetted.

From England, mid 1530s AD

Ht 27.6 cm

Bequeathed by George Salting

Gilded mummy mask

ANCIENT EGYPTIANS used mummy masks to protect the face of the deceased and act as a substitute for the mummified head, should it be damaged or lost. Egyptians believed that the spirit (*ba*) survived death and could leave the tomb but needed to recognize its host in order to return. It is perhaps odd therefore that mummy masks are rarely realistic portraits but usually have idealized features, such as on this example.

The mask was created from layers of linen with a thin outer coating of plaster (cartonnage) which could then be painted or gilded. The use of gold was connected to the belief that the sun god Re, with whom the mummy hoped to be united, had flesh of pure gold. The headband on this example is inscribed with a funerary text and the top of the mask is decorated with a winged scarab beetle to associate it with the sun god.

*From Egypt, late 1st century BC–early 1st century AD
Ht 44 cm*

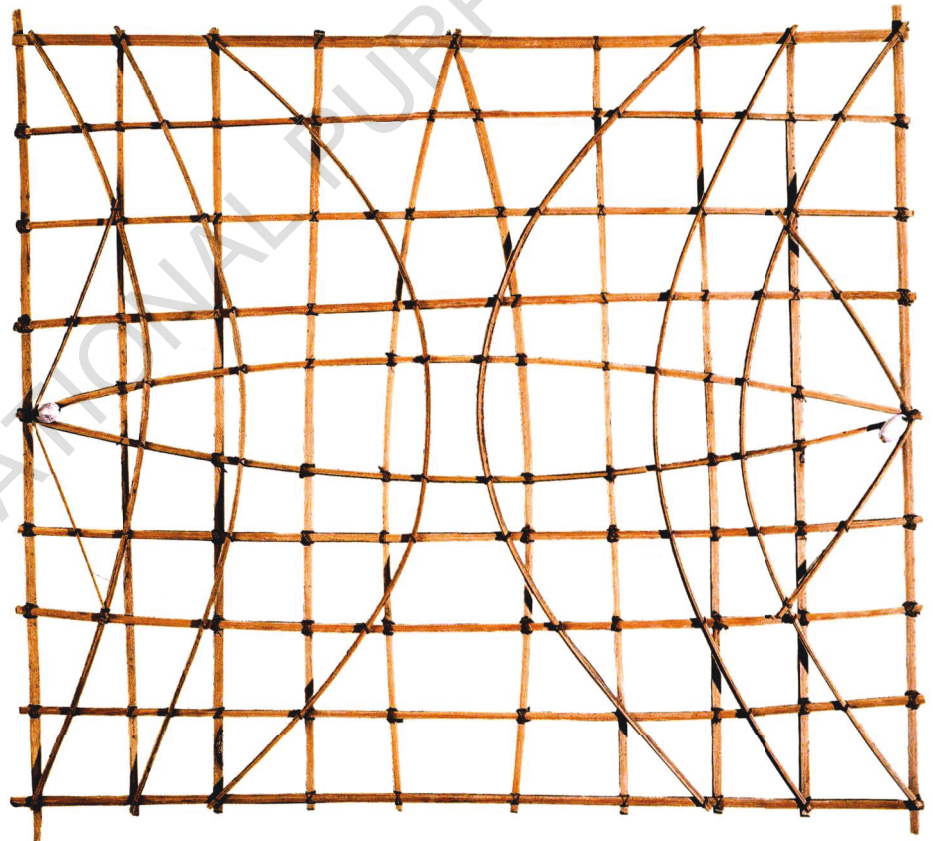


Navigation chart (*mattang*)

THIS FRAME OF STICKS and seashells is a map to help sailors navigate part of the Pacific Ocean. It was used by the Marshall Islanders of Micronesia, whose islands are spread across several hundred miles of the Pacific Ocean. A detailed knowledge of winds, tides, currents, wave patterns and swells was vital to their successful navigation. The map would not have been taken on a voyage but was made to help train people selected to become navigators and could be used as a memory aid before setting out.

Made from sticks tied together and popularly known as 'stick charts', they depict the location of islands and their surrounding swell movements and wave patterns. The horizontal and vertical sticks form a framework upon which diagonal and curved sticks represent wave swells and small shells represent the positions of the islands.

*From the Marshall Islands, Micronesia,
probably 19th or early 20th century AD
L. 75.5 cm
Gift of Mrs H.G. Beasley*



Sloane astrolabe

THIS BEAUTIFUL AND COMPLEX object is an astrolabe. It could be used for navigating a ship by calculating latitude, but it could also be used for time-keeping (both day and night) and for surveying and casting horoscopes. Astrolabes came to Europe from the Islamic world in the Middle Ages.

This particular astrolabe could also be used to calculate the dates of the movable Christian feasts. Three of the saints' days that could be calculated have particular connections with England: Dunstan (celebrated on 19 May), Augustine of Canterbury (26 May), and Edmund (20 November). These saints, and the fact that London is the only place mentioned on the latitude plates, suggests that this astrolabe was made in England. It is one of three astrolabes that belonged to Sir Hans Sloane, whose collections formed the foundation of the British Museum.

*From England, c. AD 1300
D. 46 cm
Bequeathed by Sir Hans Sloane*



John Constable (1776–1837), *Stonehenge*



HOW A PARTICULAR PLACE has been depicted by different artists can reveal as much about the time and culture the artist lived in as it does the place being depicted. The great prehistoric British monument of Stonehenge is no exception. These two images of Stonehenge were made by two famous artists, one English and one Japanese.

John Constable visited Stonehenge in 1820, where he made a sketch that he eventually worked up into a large watercolour. This watercolour over black chalk represents a middle stage in the

process and is squared for transfer to a larger sheet. The finished work (now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London) was captioned: 'the mysterious monument ... standing remote on a bare and boundless heath, as much unconnected with the events of the past as it is with the uses of the present, carries you back beyond all historical records into the obscurity of a totally unknown period'.

From Wiltshire, England, AD 1820–35

Ht 16.8 cm

Gift of Miss Isabel Constable

Urushibara Mokuchu (Yoshijiro) (1888–1953), *Stonehenge, Moonlight*

THIS VIEW OF STONEHENGE was made by the Japanese artist Urushibara. A woodblock print artist, he came to London from Tokyo as part of an exhibition of Japanese print-making. He remained in England teaching colour woodblock printing techniques and became a major influence on the works of many European artists.

Urushibara's own designs were usually still lifes (*kacho-e*), particularly of flowers, though he did produce landscapes of English and Italian scenes. This colour woodblock print of Stonehenge in moonlight was one of a pair (the other shows Stonehenge in daylight) produced from many of the same blocks (*betsuzuri*). This scene has an extra block for the moon, while the daytime scene has the addition of a shepherd and his dog herding his sheep in the foreground, and a flock of birds in the sky. The combination of the Japanese technique and Urushibara's artistic heritage give these views of Stonehenge a distinctive look.



From England, mid 20th century AD

Ht 24.8 cm

W. 37.4 cm

Gift of Professor Luke Herrmann

Crucifixion of Christ



THIS IS ONE OF THE earliest known depictions of the Crucifixion in Christian art. It was made in Rome about AD 420–30, at a time when the Roman empire in Western Europe was fragmenting. The panel is one of four, originally mounted on the sides of a small ivory casket, each carved with a scene from Christ's Passion.

In this image the Crucifixion is combined with another scene of death: the suicide of the disciple Judas after he has betrayed Jesus. The stiff, clothed body of Judas pulls down the

branch of a tree, and a spilled sack of coins lies at his feet. In contrast the exposed limbs of Christ still appear vigorous, and he gazes at the viewer, triumphant in death. A plaque over Christ's head is inscribed REX IUD (King of the Jews). The Virgin Mary and John the Baptist stand to the left of the cross, while on the right Longinus steps from beneath the arm of the cross.

*Probably made in Rome, AD 420–30
Ht 7.5 cm*