

The Future(s) of the Museum

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HOUSTON **FORESIGHT**
Preparing Professional Futurists

WORLD FUTURES, SPRING 2023
CLIENT: THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The British
Museum

“In 1753, Parliament created a museum which would foster the study of human societies through time and across the globe. The collection was to be available, free of charge, to all visitors, native and foreign. It was to be the collection of every Citizen of the World. Today it is probably the most comprehensive survey in existence of the material culture of humanity... The British Museum was the first national museum in the world. It was the first public institution to be called British – because it was not (like the continental museums) the collection of the King but a collection for the citizen.”

From *Towards 2020: The British Museum Strategy*, released in 2014.



A large, detailed stone relief sculpture of a horse and rider, likely from an ancient civilization. The sculpture is mounted on a wall, and the horse is depicted in a dynamic, galloping pose. The rider is wearing a long, flowing robe and a helmet. The background of the relief is a light-colored stone, and the entire scene is set against a modern building facade with large glass panels.

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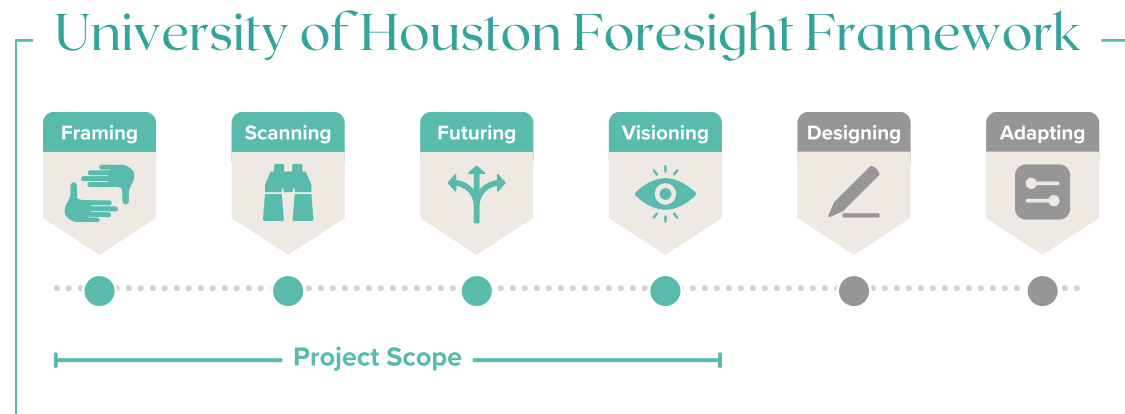
Introduction

For centuries, museums—many of which house collections sourced from all over the world, in purpose-built environments—have been associated with power, permanence, knowledge, and reach.

From the Industrial Era onward, Western museums also became a place to educate the public and share the benefits of empire.

Today, some museums retain those connotations, even as those foundational concepts complicate and fracture around them. Museums as a body are changing as the world changes; the old definition of a “museum” is stretching.

This project explores the medium- and long-term futures of the British Museum, the original “Museum of the World,” in an environment of changing social expectations around the ownership and display of artifacts; technological developments; climate change and its sequelae; changes to Western predominance; and shifting public needs and realities.

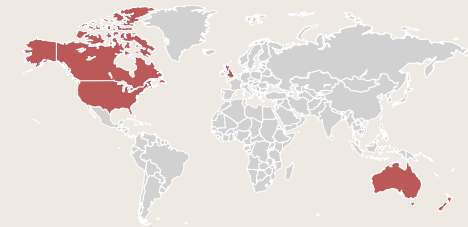


Client (hypothetical)

The British Museum

Geographical scope

Global, with a focus on the Anglosphere and United Kingdom



Time Horizon

► H2 (2025 – 2035)

Key Questions:

Museums are public spaces for education, storytelling and myth-building that collect, preserve, and interpret primary-source objects and information that cultures deem significant. **How are conditions changing that may affect what museums are valued for, and what they can do? What opportunities and risks are arising?**

Stakeholders

Funders (government/legislators)

Museums can foster a sense of national or group identity through reclamation of culture, the creation of a narrative, or the staking out of intellectual territory.

Donors (private)

Many museums are founded or resourced in order to amplify a topic the funder wants to support.

Audience (local)

Museums have been called the major source of “informal education” for communities about their own regions/histories.

Researchers

The British Museum publicly displays about 1% of the 8 million objects in its collection. The rest serves as a research archive for international scholars.

Audience (visitor)

Many large museums are international destinations in their own right. Museum-going travelers have been found to spend 63% more than non-museum-goers.

City of London, United Kingdom

The British Museum represents not only current British identity, but also a historical sense of empire. Museums can also influence community makeup, with workers drawn to places that offer cultural resources.

Global community

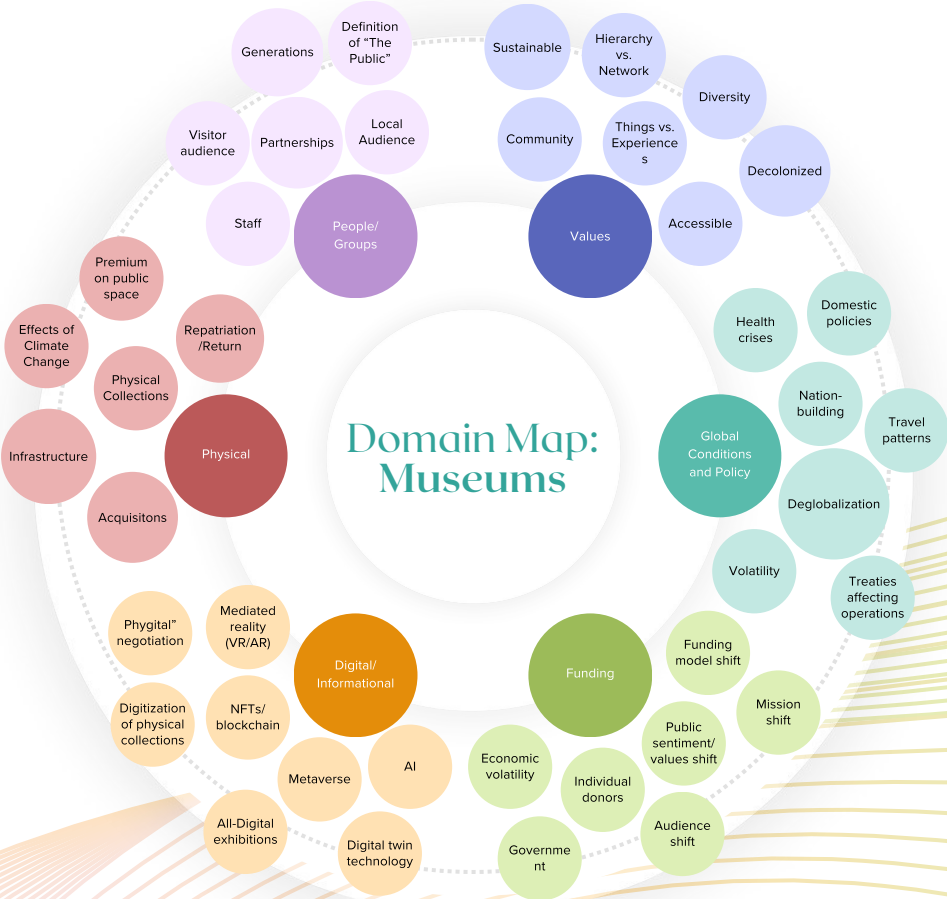
[International museum networks](#), to which the British Museum belongs, can create their own transnational communities. Museums with a [significant digital presence](#) can also provide a sense of global connection.

Employees

Museum employment in the UK [rose](#) from 84,000 in 2014 to 108,000 in 2022, bucking global trends towards automation and staff shortages.

The “public”

In an age of [shrinking public spaces](#), publicly funded museums and libraries are some of the last holdouts from an era of more generous public space.



Museums: An Evolutionary Timeline

While retaining their narrative potency, museums are changing in function and approach: from monumentality to multiplicity; from permanence to nimbleness; from imposing one dominant story, to revealing parallel or alternative stories.

Ashmolean Museum

Oxford, UK
Founded: 1683, from the collection of Elias Ashmole. Often called first "modern" museum.
Function: To share a private cultural and art



1683

British Museum

London, UK
Founded: 1759 (divided into natural history and cultural halves in 1963).
Function: To create a publicly accessible "museum of the world." One of its most famous holdings is the Egyptian Rosetta Stone.



1759

Hermitage Museum

St. Petersburg, Russia
Founded: 1764
Function: Art museum, transitioning from international to domestic visitorship since the invasion of Ukraine.



1764

Musée du Louvre

Paris, France
Founded: 1793
Function: Post-revolution Museum of Arts, for the people. Currently the world's most visited museum.



1793

Smithsonian Institution

Washington DC, USA
Founded: 1846, from the collection of James Smithsonian.
Function: To promote "the increase and diffusion of knowledge," and eventually to showcase evolving American identity.



1846

Tokyo National Museum

Japan
Founded: 1872
Function: Founded less than two decades after the opening of Japan in 1853, on the model of other national museums. Art and Asia Japan focus.



1872

Royal BC Museum

Victoria, Canada
Founded: 1886
Purpose: To celebrate the history of Canada's west coast. Announced demolition and \$800 million reconstruction in 2022, following discovery of Canadian mass native residential school burials.



1886

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Washington DC, USA
Announced: 2003
Opened: 2016
Function: Reparation. To consolidate and celebrate the suppressed history and cultures of people of African descent in the United States.



2016

Museum of Homelessness

UK
Founded: 2015
Function: To collect and tell the stories and histories of homeless people, by people with experience of homelessness, in temporary exhibitions and events.



2015

Climate Museum

New York, USA and on social media
Founded: 2014
Function: To serve as a nimble, multi-medium clearinghouse of climate change dialogue. Pop up space, events, dialogue, geographically.



2014

Museum of Broken Relationships

Pop-ups and digital
Founded: 2010. Also a website, where anyone can share a breakup story online and pin it geographically.
Function: To create global community through common experience, permanent online presence, and ephemeral physical exhibits.



2010

National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution

Washington DC, USA
Announced: 1989 (after the discovery that SI was storing more than 12,000 indigenous human remains)
Opened: 2004
Function: To tell Native American stories and culture as a part of repairing the wrongs of American history.



2004

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Spain
Founded: 1997
Function: To revitalize the city of Bilbao with cross cultural exchange. Extension of Guggenheim influence.



1997

Museo Nacional de Antropología

Mexico City, Mexico
Founded: 1964
Function: To create a national museum of Mexico to house archaeological and anthropological artifacts from the country's pre-Columbian history.



1964

ARTEHOUSE

Multiple global locations
Opened: 2017
Function: Visitors experience digitally projected immersive art at many global gallery locations that easily rotate exhibitions.



2017

Burke Museum

Seattle, USA
Reopened: 2019 with new facilities and mission.
Function: New mission includes "healing." Is often held up as an example of deep engagement with decolonization.



2019

Museum of the Future

Dubai, UAE
Opened: 2022
Function: To position the Middle East as an international locus of forward-thinking soft power.



2022

Musée Dezentral

Digital
Opened: 2022
Function: Museum in the metaverse dedicated to the removal of cultural arbiters and gatekeepers.



2023

The Holocaust Museum in Fortnite

Digital
Opened: 2023
 The video game Fortnite offers virtual-world real-estate, and one of the early takers is a virtual museum where avatars can wander the marble halls and learn about events of the Holocaust.



Grand Egyptian Museum

Cairo, Egypt
Announced: 2002
Opening: Projected, late 2023 or 2024.
Function: To provide state of the art facilities to house Egypt's archaeological heritage. Many Egyptians hope it will eventually house the Rosetta Stone.



- 2024

Museums: Recent Events

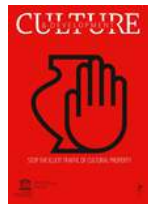
1970s -

2000s

2010s

2020s

1970 [UNESCO treaty](#) governing illicit import and export of artifacts.



2005 Return of [Axum Obelisk](#) from Italy to Ethiopia.

2010 British Prime Minister David Cameron tells an Indian news channel that the return of the Koh-i-Noor diamond to India is not possible: "If you say yes to one, you suddenly find the British Museum would be empty...I'm afraid it's going to have to stay put."

2014 British Museum publishes its most recent strategic plan.

2018 French President Emmanuel Macron announces the repatriation of African treasures taken by France during the colonial era.

2019 Tate Museums Group, Guggenheim, and UK National Portrait Gallery [all halt funding from Sackler family](#).

2019-present Rash of climate-related political high-profile [vandalism](#) at museums.

2020 COVID-19 Pandemic. Museums shut. Staff furloughed. While they have reopened, physical attendance at museums is still recovering. Virtual exhibitions/collections expand.

2020 Government of Turkey reclassifies 1700-year-old Hagia Sophia from a secular museum to a mosque.

2020 Black Lives Matter movement.



2020-2021 National Museum of Korea launches [gamified digital twin](#) of the museum in Minecraft.

2021 [Database](#) of permanent US museum closings since 2016 created. Nearly all are small regional museums.

2022 Museum cultural artifact repatriations [surge](#). Smithsonian adopts "[ethical returns policy](#)" that leads to the return of their collection of Benin bronzes.

2022 *New Yorker* publishes "The Rise of Immersive Art," about art/museum installations that run on projections and require no physical movement of objects.

November **2022** In a trustees' dinner speech, George Osborne, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum, seeks to [redefine](#) museums as "not just a collection of objects...but instead a set of relationships." This initiative comes to be known as the "Rosetta Project."

November **2022** Arts Council England, a major funding body, [dramatically reallocates](#) funding away from London and towards regional art centers, as part of a long-running conversation on class, race, and regionalism in the UK.

November **2022** Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA) [releases](#) an exact 3D replica of a Parthenon sculpture, using LiDAR technology. It proposes that the originals be repatriated to Greece.

May **2023** British Museum [quietly drops](#) the controversial name "Rosetta" from its transformation project, which is now called "Masterplan." Release delayed until Autumn.

June **2023** British Museum allows decades-long sponsorship from British Petrol to [expire](#), marking the end of BP's last major British arts partnership. Decision is widely praised.

August **2023** British Museum [admits](#) that close to 2,000 Greek and Roman antiquities, worth "millions of pounds," have been lost or stolen by staff. Its director resigns; international calls for repatriation grow.

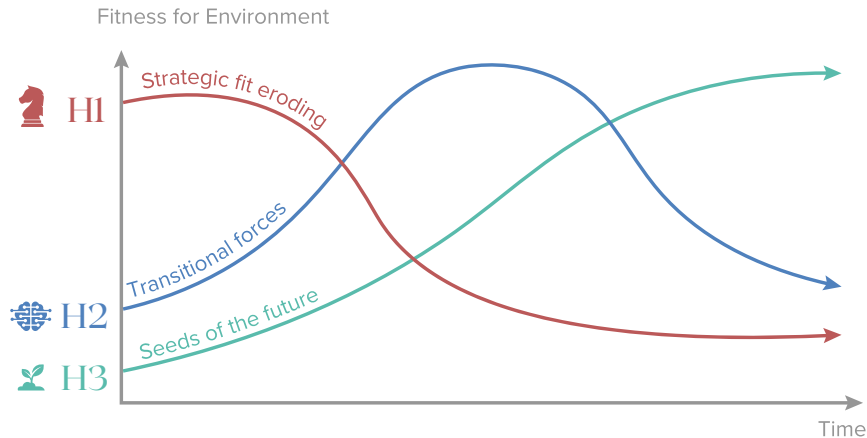
December **2023** In a dramatic U-turn, British Museum announces a new 50-million-pound [sponsorship](#) by British Petrol. Strategic "Masterplan" remains unpublished.





Scan Hits

Highlights from a database of 100+ compiled scan hits.



Horizon 1: Near Term

- [Private donor ethics shift](#): Large institutions across the West cut ties with the controversial Sackler family, one of many reconsiderations of the source of donor funds.
- [Domestic](#) and [international](#) flights are consolidated and cut from and [within](#) North America due to lack of personnel and air traffic controller shortage.
- 35% of art museums report [significant damage](#) because of climate change. Activist-led museum vandalism also [explodes](#) in popularity.
- [Stuff the British Stole](#), popular podcast and then TV series about “treasures” liberated from their places of origin by the British Empire.
- Worldwide, people spent an [average of 7 hours](#) online daily in 2022; total smartphone users [increased](#) from 2.65 billion in 2016 to 5.25 billion in 2023.

Horizon 2: Medium Term

- [Personhood](#) for nature: Rivers and other natural phenomena are increasingly being granted legal personhood, blurring the boundary between humans and nature.
- [Data sculpture](#): Artist Refik Anadol uses AI-enhanced data streams to create immersive and ever-changing “machine dreams.” His work has exploded in popularity over the last two years.
- After the British Museum’s stolen-item scandal in the summer of 2023, [“Escape from the British Museum,”](#) a TikTok-style video about a Chinese artefact that wants to go home, has more than 270 million plays on Douyin, China’s TikTok equivalent.
- [Preference](#) of intangible experiences over tangible things increasing.

Horizon 3: Long Term

- [The Network State](#): “A [network state](#) is a highly aligned online community...[that] eventually gains diplomatic recognition from pre-existing states.” If the network state is realized, what kind of museums will that engender?
- [Looty](#), a collective of designers based in London, executes a “digital heist” of the Rosetta Stone, scanning it and repatriating it to the site of its discovery, as augmented reality.
- Climate change elevates the [difficulty of protecting museums’ physical collections](#).
- [“What Stories Should Historians Be Telling at the Dawn of the Anthropocene?”](#) One of many places that calls for new narratives to transition into an age where human history determines the course of all life on earth.



Current Conditions

(HIGHLIGHTS)

With the COVID-19 pandemic, a multi-year Brexit divorce from Europe, and rapidly shifting geopolitical conditions that include the war in Ukraine, the past decade has both provided an object lesson in postnormality and the spiraling complexity of polycrisis, and illustrated the value of large-scale institutions that can weather shocks and provide continuity.



CHALLENGES

- Long-term volatility on several fronts (economic, political/governance, climate, values)
- Histories and artifact ownership/possession are increasingly contested, and reaching a tipping point.
- Natural history and empire are no longer “feel-good” – narratives of decline.
- “Global museums” feel imperial, out of step with the West.
- Physical space/objects costlier to maintain (climate change, activism)
- Global collection-building no longer feasible
- Traditional private sources of funding becoming problematic; new private funds hard to come by
- UK public funding for arts/humanities moving strongly away from London-based institutions

EMERGING ISSUES

- How to remain relevant and resilient when values and conditions are shifting, while drawing on real strengths and preserving continuity?
- How to keep evolving when physical growth is difficult?
- How to fulfill the needs of the museum’s shifting audiences in a way they respond to?
- How can the British Museum contribute to unity and fruitful dialogue through an extended period of sometimes extensive change in the world, and in Britain?
- How to thrive across radically different future possibilities?
- How to remain compelling for future generations, who have different values and different preferred ways of processing information?

PLANS

- **2021 – 2026** [Honolulu Museum of Art Strategic Plan](#).
- **2022 – 2025** [American Alliance of Museums strategic framework](#).
- **2022 – 2028** [ICOM](#) (International Council of Museums) strategic plan.

PROJECTIONS

- [What Is the Future of the Museum](#)
- [Special issue of Museum magazine: “Museums 2040”](#)
- [The Next Horizon of Museum Practice: Voluntary Repatriation, Restitution, and Reparations](#).
- [Qatar Kicks Off a Major Museum Building Programme](#).

Drivers of Change (STEEP-V)

Society

Changes in storytelling: From dominant story to multiplicity of viewpoints.
Changes in pedagogy: From imposing a truth to reflecting or revealing a truth
Generational change: Gen Z and Gen Alpha prefer experiences to things, and immersion to contemplation, part of a larger shift.

Politics

Decolonization.
Demographic changes post-Brexit: European exodus, but more immigrants from outside Europe.
Decline of Anglosphere/Western dominance

Values

Values orientation: from permanence to ephemeral.
Changes in art consumption: From contemplation to immersion.
Shift from past-orientation to present- and future-orientation

Technology

Shift from physical towards phygital/digital.
Rise of digital twin and AR technology.
Volatility/fracturing of digital public spaces (including social media).

Economy

Private funding: increased moral scrutiny of donors.
Public funding: continued austerity, and shift away from London institutions

Environment

Climate change: Increasing costs of maintaining physical collections and infrastructure.
Changes in climate patterns expected to drive visitors to UK over southern destinations.
Physical public spaces becoming increasingly scarce

Implications: Key Changes

(HIGHLIGHTS, THIRD-ORDER IMPACTS)

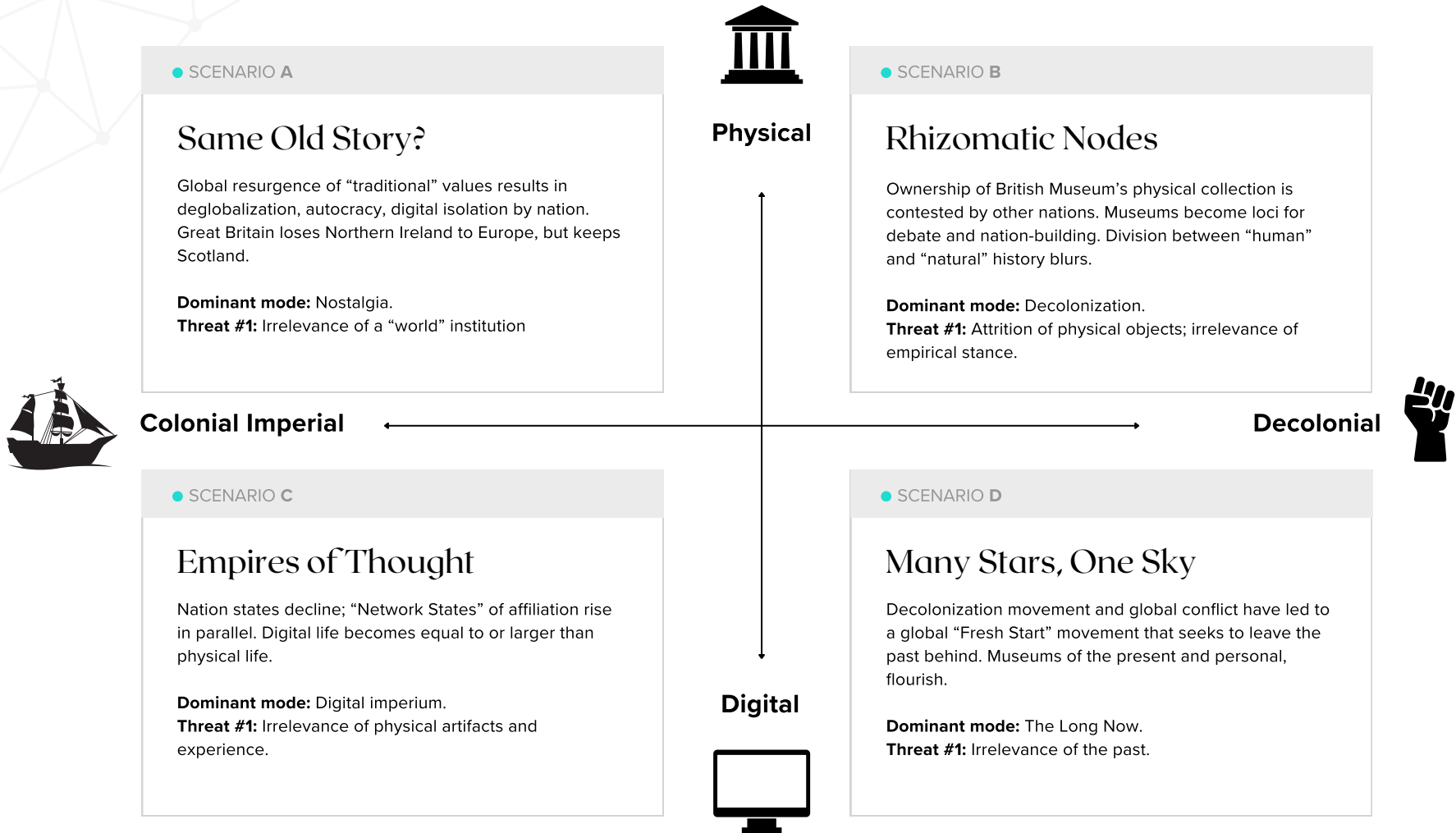
- **Deglobalization:** Movement of people and things becomes more costly and unreliable due to climate change and geopolitics.
- **Decolonization,** social justice, inclusion movements gain steam.
- **Digital life** becomes widely acknowledged as at least 50% of human reality.
- **The nation state,** with its physical boundaries, erodes in influence, even as the relative power of Western nations declines globally.

Possible Implications



2X2 SCENARIOS

Scenarios seek to expand and make visible the scope of possible and probable futures.
No scenario is a prediction. Every scenario charts a set of possibilities.





● SCENARIO A

Same Old Story?

In this world, “traditional” values have seen a global resurgence, with a twist. Abroad, autocracies have gained ground, often resorting to isolating their digital systems from the outside world. The global nature of the internet has shrunk, although the English-speaking world and Europe are still connected. Post-Brexit, Britain has managed to keep hold of Scotland, but Northern Ireland has broken away to join the EU.

Large museums are still used primarily as expressions of political power. Even then, the real world has crept in.

Britain is not what it once was, but the British Museum has become an instrument of Brexit-based nostalgia for empire, even as museums in China, India and the Middle East showcase newly global holdings— including the Elgin marbles, which Greece reclaimed from the British Museum, then sold to Dubai during a debt default.





● SCENARIO B

Rhizomatic Nodes

The movement to decolonize has swept much of the world. Supply chains have shortened, and power has localized and regionalized. Museums are still largely physical. Once-global museums have undergone radical shifts towards repatriation and restitution. They have often refocused on local, place-based nation-building and storytelling, highlighting local archaeological finds, regional art, or regional technologies. Healing and adaptation through volatile times are the major themes, as local cultures seek to reconcile histories of injustice by presenting multifaceted and parallel narratives. Museums have also become loci for debate, mutual encounter, and the creation of living culture.

Living beings are treated more equally in 2043, and humans are placed in context, with several museums opening that blend natural history into human history. Natural history museums have also become resources to track climate change and centers of adaptation.

Face to face encounters and relationships, and the sharing of physical experiences, have become signals of specialness and intimacy. In the West, sparked by the “Museum of the Self” movement, many members of Gen Alpha collect and curate boxes of objects important to their life stories, which they share only in person, never online. When they move communities, they bring these with them.

● SCENARIO C

Empires of Thought

In this world, museums are still driven by the force of empire-building, but that presence has extended into the digital life that now accounts for the majority of peoples' life experiences.

Acceleration of climate change has made long-distance travel increasingly expensive and out of reach for ordinary people. As the power of the nation-state and its infrastructure continues to erode, digital empires of ideology have begun to take shape. This is a world in which physical race, appearance, history and former culture matter less, and likeness of thought matters more.

Hundreds of “Network States”, which create civic and political belonging, collect taxes, and direct funds, according to ideology, affinity, language, and/or value systems across national boundaries. Major powers like China, the US, and Europe still exist in a weakened form, but other nations have either merged or been “bought out” by Network States seeking a physical geography. Most Network States have established an official digital or “phygital” Museum to educate visitors, welcome new citizens, and serve as a public square. Because Network States usually have no physical existence, their Museums have taken on outsize importance.





● SCENARIO D

Many Stars, One Sky

This world has leaned hard into digital life and decolonization—or rather, acolonization, as many have decided to leave the tangled past behind and focus solely on the present and future, beginning from a Year One that followed the war of 2024 – 2027, in which great powers exchanged nuclear weapons on a limited scale. In this world, Gen Alpha has connected with each other globally and digitally, repudiating history-obsessed previous generations and replacing them with a Fresh Start (بداية جديدة.; 新开始) in which all people are considered equal, digital life is considered equal to physical life, and the past exists, but it begins at Year One (2028).

Followers of the Fresh Start live a significant part of their lives in the New World, a digital metaverse where members agree not to talk about The Before. Museums that flourish in this world are founded around affinity and experience groups, of which the Museum of Broken Relationships was an early avatar: largely online, with physical pop-ups and events, the MoBR gathers stories and artifacts of former relationships into an ever-expanding archive of heartbreak, allowing participants to share their histories and feel less alone.

Physical museums sometimes persist, with far less funding than they once had, and are visited almost exclusively by those aged 60 and above. The British Museum is in the process of being mostly dismantled as a cost-saving measure and a gesture of decolonial goodwill, and turned into a museum of wordless immersive art where visitors, regardless of global provenance, can experience the same thing and interpret it as they please.

Image source: Robynne Hu/Unsplash

Key Opportunities



OPPORTUNITY 1

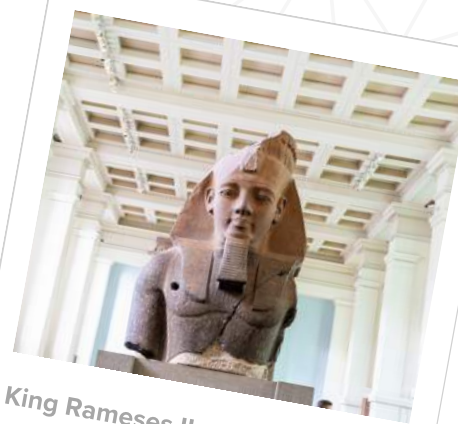
Consolidate

Recognize the museum's unique holdings—8 million global objects—were born of a period in history that will not come again for some time. No other museum has the ability to build a similarly global collection.

By hewing to its mission but refreshing its storytelling, the British Museum has an unrivalled opportunity to showcase compelling and much-needed stories of global commonality, diversity, and human affiliation, both physically and digitally.

As digital life becomes more central, the museum's digital/global presence will become more important.

Image source: Envato elements, Canva



King Ramses II

1250BC

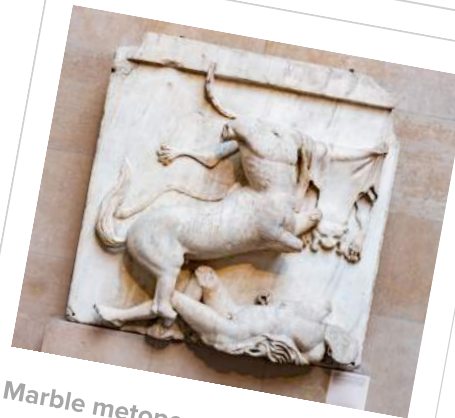
This statue was carved from a single block, quarried at Aswan almost 124 miles (200km) south.



Rosetta Stone

1799AD

Inscribed in three scripts, the Rosetta Stone served as the key to the translation of Egyptian hieroglyphs.



Marble metope

447-438BC

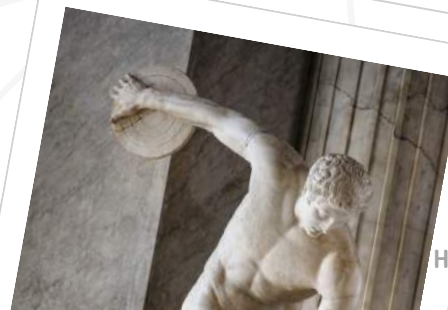
This metope, from the eastern half of the south side of the temple, depicts the battle between Centaurs and Lapiths at the marriage feast of Peirithoos.



Lewis Chessmen

1150-1200AD

These mysterious chess pieces, found on the Isle of Lewis in Scotland, are made from worked walrus ivory and whales' teeth.



Viewing



The remains of a 27-meter ship burial, Sutton Hoo is an important archaeological site in the East of England.



Key Opportunities



OPPORTUNITY 2

Merge

Reunite with London's Natural History Museum, which legally separated from the British Museum in 1963.

This would allow the British Museum to retain continuity and celebrate tradition, while vaulting to the forefront of relevant global problem-solving and storytelling in the Anthropocene: humans shaping, and shaped by, the natural world.

Image source: Canva





Key Opportunities



OPPORTUNITY 3

Grow

Lean into digital space, into Britishness, and into dialogue. The British Museum does not have the resources or the political conditions to keep building its global physical collections.

But it does have a unique claim to define what it means to be British in an evolving physical/digital world, for all who feel affinity with these values, histories, and landscapes.

In a post-Brexit, digitally dominated world, the museum has an opportunity to explore and reconcile a colonial history, heal wounds, and celebrate achievements.



Key Opportunities



OPPORTUNITY 4

Multiply

The intergenerational decline of the importance of physical objects vs. experiences and digital life, and the growth of digital reproduction technologies, offer an opportunity to preserve the museum's educational and display function while restoring the objects themselves to their places of origin, for research.

As calls grow to repatriate looted or stolen objects, holographic or physical digital twins can be crafted that are visually indistinguishable from the original object. Digitally, books' pages can be turned, and boxes can be opened. In many cases, reproductions can also be created that visitors can touch, hold, and interact with. Travel or sharing agreements can be hammered out.

Digital twinning and selective repatriation would enhance international goodwill and redistribute the burden of caring for these objects in a time of volatile funding, changing values, and climate change, reducing critical load on The British Museum.

Conclusion

The British Museum faces unprecedented headwinds, with both domestic and international values shifting strongly away from its historic strengths, and funding streams becoming increasingly volatile.

However, the Museum still possesses a unique history and cultural position, and a research collection that cannot be reassembled—and socio-technological developments make politically equitable access to artifacts ever more possible. The British Museum still has many paths to thriving in a central role in the ongoing evolution of British and global cultural life.



Key Threats:

- Decolonization/multipolarity
- Devaluing of traditional museum purposes.
- Climate change
- Erosion of value placed on physical objects
- Generational disconnection with problematic pasts



Key Opportunities

- Need for new Anthropocene narratives
- Embrace phygital/scaleable presence
- Need for physical public space
- Need for leadership of post-Brexit national identity conversation

Thank you for your consideration!

I welcome questions, further discussion, or feedback; please contact lavonneleong@gmail.com.