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# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## 6 Minute English

### The criminal trade in ancient objects



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

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**Neil**

Hello, this is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

**Beth**

And I'm Beth. Neil, what is the oldest thing you have at home?

**Neil**

Ooh... well, I do have some books from when I was a child.

**Beth**

I have a rocking horse that was my dad's, so that is quite old. But neither of these are anywhere near as old as the 1,800-year-old Roman coin which BBC reporter Ryan Keane recently bought in London. But soon afterwards, Ryan discovered there was more to the story, as he explains here on BBC World Service programme Business Daily:

**Ryan Keane**

But as I researched into other kinds of ancient **artefacts** I could acquire, I came across reports of expansive criminal networks related to antiquities. Some ancient **artefacts** being sold online and in stores have been **looted** and trafficked.

**Neil**

Ryan got interested in **artefacts** from Egypt, Greece and Rome. An **artefact** is any object made by humans, usually very old, which is historically interesting – for example, a coin or statue.

**Beth**

In the past, many **artefacts** have been **looted** – or stolen by force. Movies like Indiana Jones and Tomb Raider have made the subject popular, but the theft of ancient objects is a serious problem in some parts of the world. So, what can be

done about it? That's what we'll be discussing in this episode, using some useful new words and phrases.

### Neil

And remember – you'll find all the vocabulary from this episode on our website, [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com). Now, I have a question for you, Beth. One of the most famous ancient **artefacts** was discovered by Egyptologist Howard Carter in the Valley of the Kings in 1922, but what was it? Was it:

- a) the Rosetta Stone,
- b) the Mask of Tutankhamun, or
- c) the Ark of the Covenant?

### Beth

Oh, I think it's b) the Mask of Tutankhamun.

### Neil

OK. Let's find out later in the programme. Stealing ancient objects is nothing new. During colonial times, it was common for **artefacts** to be taken from their original home and moved to museums and private collections abroad. In the modern era, technology, especially social media, has increased the problem. Here's, Amr Al-Azm, a researcher from Shawnee State University in the US, explaining more to BBC's Business Daily:

### Amr Al-Azm

Social media is the **game changer** here. The **bottleneck**, if you will, was how does someone who has an item then communicate with someone on the demand side? It used to slow the process – you had to go through intermediaries. Social media changes all that because it just opens it up.

### Beth

Amr calls social media a **game changer** – something new that is introduced into a situation and completely changes how it works. For example, the internet has been a **game changer** in how we communicate.

### Neil

The reason is simple. For someone with illegally stolen **artefacts** to sell, finding a buyer used to be difficult. Amr thinks that now, because of social media, this problem, or **bottleneck**, is gone. A **bottleneck** is a problem that delays a process or stops it from progressing.

**Beth**

So, what can be done to stop the illegal buying and selling of ancient **artefacts**? Well, as the final destination for much **looted** treasure, museums have an important role to play. Accusations of knowingly or unknowingly buying stolen objects have been made against several museums, including the Louvre in Paris.

**Neil**

Victoria Reed is senior curator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. In 2024, she helped her museum return an ancient necklace which had been taken illegally from Turkey in the 1970s. But the idea of returning **artefacts** to their country of origin, something known as **repatriation**, is controversial, as Victoria told BBC programme Business Daily:

**Victoria Reed**

Outside of the museum world, of course, there are many opinions, and I personally try to maintain a relatively **middle-of-the-road** approach. I believe in museums, I believe in responsible collecting and I believe in judicious **repatriation** decisions.

**Beth**

There are arguments both for and against repatriating **artefacts**, and Victoria takes a **middle-of-the-road** approach. If you describe something as **middle-of-the-road**, you mean it's not extreme and is acceptable to most people.

**Neil**

Whether ancient **artefacts** find their way back to their original homes or are displayed in museums remains an ongoing debate, but either way it's good to know that objects of culture and beauty are being preserved for future generations. OK. I think it's time to reveal the answer to my question. I asked what the Egyptologist Howard Carter discovered in the Valley of the Kings in 1922. Was it: a) the Rosetta Stone, b) the Mask of Tutankhamun, or c) the Ark of the Covenant?

**Beth**

And I said, "The Mask of Tutankhamun."

**Neil**

And you, Beth... were right.

**Beth**

Yes!

**Neil**

OK. Let's recap the vocabulary we've learned, starting with **artefact** – any object made by humans which is of historical interest.

**Beth**

If something is **looted**, it's stolen by force.

**Neil**

A **game changer** is a new element which, when introduced into a situation, completely changes it.

**Beth**

A **bottleneck** is a problem that delays a process or stops it from progressing.

**Neil**

To **repatriate** something means to return it to the country it came from.

**Beth**

And finally, the adjective **middle-of-the-road** describes things which are not extreme and are acceptable to most people. Once again, our six minutes are up. If you enjoyed this programme, why not check out the accompanying worksheet and quiz? They're both available now at [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com). See you there soon and goodbye.

**Neil**

Goodbye!

## VOCABULARY

**artefact**

object made by humans, such as a tool or decoration, which is of historical interest

**looted**

forcefully stolen

**game changer**

new element that is introduced into a situation and completely changes how it operates

**bottleneck**

problem that delays a process or stops it from progressing

**repatriate**

return something or someone to the country they originally came from

**middle-of-the-road**

not extreme; acceptable to most people