

## Art in Roman Leicester

In the 18th and 19th centuries there was intense rivalry between Britain and other European nations to lay claim to the classical (Greek and Roman) world. European nations saw themselves as successors to the great classical civilisations, and huge effort was invested in excavating and recording archaeological sites and antiquities.

The rigorous study of Greek and Roman literature and language was an essential part of an aristocratic (male) education and a marker of social status from at least the 16th century. A Grand Tour of Europe was an important element of this classical education. Many impressive private collections of classical antiquities were established in this period as aristocrats returned home with sculptures and vases to adorn their stately homes.

Have a look at the collection at Holkham, Norfolk:  
<https://www.holkham.co.uk/visiting/the-hall/the-statue-gallery>

Less spectacular examples of art in Roman Britain, including everyday objects which were often locally produced, received relatively little attention until the 1960s when an exhibition of the *Art of Roman Britain* was held in Goldsmiths' Hall in London in July 1961. This exhibition was important because it assembled a wide variety of Romano-British art for the first time. Since this period, archaeologists have studied the full range of art in Britain which can help us to understand the complex and creative choices made by individuals who were living under Roman rule; a mixture of imported forms, as well as distinctive local traditions, is evident on everyday objects in Leicester (see below).



During groundwork near the macellum site (beneath the Travelodge on Highcross Street, Leicester) part of a stone altar was found showing a bearded reclining figure wearing a robe and a distinctive fisherman's cap, possibly a water god like Oceanus.



This small rectangular ivory panel is an extremely rare object which depicts the Egyptian god Anubis squatting amongst lotus flowers and holding a lance. The panel was from a relief-carved ivory box, an exceedingly rare luxury item even in Egypt where it was made. It is remarkable that it made its way to Britain. Anubis was popular amongst Egyptian soldiers in the Roman army, and suggests that someone with a military connection may have been living in the house at Vine Street in Leicester.



This broken torso of a small white-clay figurine of the Roman goddess Venus found was in Leicester. Cheap votive figurines like this were made in central Gaul and were frequently presented as offerings to the gods at temples and household shrines. Venus figurines were often associated with women during pregnancy and childbirth. When intact, it would have shown Venus holding a tress of hair in her right hand whilst her left hand clutched a cloth draped over or beside her leg.

### To find out more

Savani, G., Scott, S. and Morris, M. 2018. *Life in the Roman World: Roman Leicester. School of Archaeology and Ancient History*, University of Leicester

Scott, S. 2014. 'Britain in the classical world: Samuel Lysons and the art of Roman Britain 1780–1820', *Classical Receptions Journal*, 6 (2), 294–337.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/crj/clt030>

Take a virtual tour of the Greek and Roman Sculpture gallery and the Roman Britain gallery at the British Museum:

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/greek-and-roman-sculpture>

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/roman-britain>

Find out more about the skills involved in Roman stoneworking: <http://www.artofmaking.ac.uk/>

### Things to think about

**What could go wrong?** What are the practical difficulties sculptors would have faced in the production of marble/stone sculptures? Find out more at: <http://www.artofmaking.ac.uk/essays-videos/>

**How did sculptors develop their skills?** To find out more have a look at these examples which were created by apprentice sculptors in Aphrodisias: <http://www.artofmaking.ac.uk/explore/monuments/409/>

**What tools were used and how do we know?** <http://www.artofmaking.ac.uk/explore/tools/>