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British Museum Room 49
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BOX 1 — COLLECTION

A. ON DISPLAY:

- Room 49 presents objects from Roman Britain, roughly AD 43–410, including military equipment, coins, jewelry, pottery, religious objects, writing tablets, sculpture, mosaics, architectural fragments, and objects from daily life.
- The objects show both ordinary and elite life. Writing tablets and domestic objects make individual lives visible, while mosaics, sculpture, gold, silver, and monumental stonework communicate wealth, status, and Roman power.
- The gallery includes an electrottype replica of the Rudge Cup, a small Roman souvenir that depicts Hadrian's Wall and names five forts along its western section. The original is at Alnwick Castle. [1]
- Objects associated with Hadrian's Wall connect daily life in Roman Britain to the military frontier that helped Rome maintain control of the province.

B. IN STORAGE/NOT DISPLAYED:

- Room 49 displays only a selection of the British Museum's much larger Roman-British collection. What visitors see is therefore a curated interpretation rather than a complete picture of nearly four centuries of Roman rule.
- Some objects are represented by replicas, including the Rudge Cup. A replica allows the museum to include an important piece of the story even when it does not own the original.
- Curators decide which objects best communicate subjects such as military occupation, religion, trade, domestic life, wealth, and cultural change. Those choices influence the Roman Britain visitors encounter.

C. COLLECTION PRACTICES/PROCEDURES:

- Objects entered collections through archaeological excavation, chance discoveries, purchases, donations, and earlier private antiquities collections.
- The quality of provenance varies. Some objects have detailed information about where and how they were found, while older discoveries sometimes have incomplete collecting histories.
- What survives, what museums acquire, and what curators choose to display all influence which parts of Roman-British life become most visible.

D. MY IMPRESSION:

- The collection does not simply show what Roman Britain was. It also reflects centuries of decisions about what was worth finding, collecting, preserving, and displaying.

- Having visited Hadrian's Wall, I am especially interested in the small objects connected to it. Something as small as the Rudge Cup can connect a museum case to an enormous physical frontier.

BOX 2 — SPACE

A. PURPOSE:

- Room 49 functions as both an exhibition and educational space. It uses objects to show how Roman occupation changed life in Britain.
- The gallery presents Roman Britain as a society in which Roman and existing British traditions interacted, creating a distinctive Romano-British culture. [2]
- Its placement near galleries covering earlier and later periods helps visitors understand Roman Britain as one part of a much longer British history.

B. MOVEMENT:

- Visitors can move through the gallery rather than following one strictly controlled route.
- Wall cases, freestanding cases, mosaics, and larger objects encourage visitors to move between different aspects of Roman life.
- The cases are organized around broad subjects such as religion, pottery, the army, buildings, and hoards. [3]

C. SPACE/DISPLAY:

- Small and fragile objects such as coins, jewelry, pottery, and writing tablets are protected in glass cases and require close viewing.
- Larger objects, including mosaics, sculpture, and stonework, provide a different sense of scale.
- Almost four centuries of occupation across an entire province are compressed into one gallery. The organization makes Roman Britain understandable, but it also removes objects from the landscapes in which they were originally used and experienced.

D. MY IMPRESSION:

- The gallery makes Roman Britain organized and accessible, but a museum case cannot reproduce the scale of the actual landscape.
- Having stood at Hadrian's Wall, I noticed what the museum cannot reproduce: the distance, terrain, weather, isolation, and physical effort involved in building and maintaining such an enormous frontier.
- Room 49 gives me the details of Roman life; Hadrian's Wall gave me the scale of Roman occupation.

BOX 3 — EXHIBITIONS

A. MESSAGE PRESENTED:

- The museum presents Roman occupation as a major transformation of Britain's material culture, economy, religion, military organization, architecture, and daily life.

- Roman and existing British traditions interacted, producing a complex Romano-British society rather than one culture simply replacing another. [2]
- Roman Britain was connected to a much larger empire. People living and serving in Britain came from regions including Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. [2]
- The gallery emphasizes military life, religion, trade, wealth, domestic life, technology, writing, architecture, and cultural exchange.

B. LAYOUT/DESIGN:

- Small personal objects are displayed alongside mosaics, sculpture, military objects, and architectural material. This moves the story between individual lives and larger expressions of Roman wealth and power.
- The themed cases make Roman Britain appear orderly and understandable, although the period itself involved conquest, migration, regional differences, military occupation, and social inequality.
- Beautiful jewelry, silver, mosaics, pottery, and sculpture can emphasize prosperity and cultural development. Military objects and material connected with Hadrian's Wall remind visitors that this society also existed within an occupied province.

C. MY IMPRESSION:

- Roman Britain was much more diverse than I had imagined. "Roman" did not necessarily mean someone from Rome. People living and serving in Britain came from many regions of the empire.
- The gallery does a good job showing cultural interaction, but beautiful surviving objects can make Roman occupation appear more peaceful than it was.
- Britain was conquered and remained under Roman military control. Hadrian's Wall makes the power required to maintain that control difficult to overlook.
- The gallery shows what life inside Roman Britain looked like; Hadrian's Wall showed me what it took to create and maintain the boundaries of that world.

BOX 4 — EDUCATION

A. WHAT VISITORS LEARN:

- Room 49 teaches Roman history through physical evidence rather than relying only on emperors, battles, and dates.
- Everyday objects make Roman Britain more human. Writing tablets, pottery, jewelry, tools, medical objects, and religious objects reveal individual routines, relationships, beliefs, and problems.
- The British Museum provides educational materials for different ages, including classroom resources that use coins, pottery, statues, stonework, and writing tablets to teach about daily life and historical change. [3][4]
- Our class is also able to experience the British Museum virtually through Google Arts & Culture, extending the educational experience beyond the physical museum. [5]

B. INTERESTING EXAMPLES:

- The Vindolanda writing tablets preserve personal communication and give us glimpses into the lives of people living near Hadrian's Wall.
- Medical objects show practical approaches to health and treatment.
- A Roman curse tablet makes religious belief and personal conflict surprisingly immediate. Religion was not limited to public worship; it could also involve private anger, fear, hope, and grievance.
- Military objects demonstrate that soldiers serving in Britain came from different parts of the Roman Empire.
- The Rudge Cup is especially interesting to me. This tiny object depicts Hadrian's Wall and names five forts, suggesting that the Wall was memorable enough in Roman times to be represented on what may have been a souvenir. [1]

C. MY IMPRESSION:

- The gallery is strongest when ordinary objects turn "Roman Britain" from an abstract historical period into individual human lives.
- Hadrian's Wall taught me through place, landscape, distance, and scale. Room 49 teaches through objects and close examination.
- The two experiences complement each other. The Wall reveals the scale of Roman power and the difficulty of controlling a frontier, while the museum reveals the people who lived, worked, worshipped, wrote, and built lives within that system.

SOURCES

[1] British Museum, "vessel; electrotpe" (Rudge Cup replica)
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1964-1007-1

[2] British Museum, "Roman Britain," Room 49
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/roman-britain>

[3] British Museum, "Roman Britain: Visit Resource"
https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/Visit_Roman_Britain_KS2b.pdf

[4] British Museum, "Classroom Resource: Romanisation in Britain"
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/learn/schools/ages-16/classroom-resource-romanisation-britain>

[5] Google Arts & Culture, "The British Museum"
<https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/the-british-museum>

