

NEWS RELEASE

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The V&A and Republic of Yemen announce historic agreement to research and care for four ancient objects ahead of their safe return

- The Metropolitan Police discovered four ancient carved stone funerary stelae, likely dating from the second half of the first millennium BCE, in an interior design shop in east London
- The police investigation established the objects are from Yemen, and came from necropoli that have been subjected to looting in recent years
- The agreement sees the V&A temporarily care, research, and conserve the stelae ahead of a new display opening at V&A East Storehouse in 2025
- Objects will be returned to their country of origin once the Republic of Yemen deems it safe to do so



Today, the V&A announces an historic agreement with the Republic of Yemen to research and temporarily care for four ancient carved stone funerary stelae, which were likely illegally looted from the Republic of Yemen. The works will be exhibited to the public as part of a new display on Culture in Crisis, the V&A's programme dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage worldwide, at V&A East Storehouse from 2025.

The objects, which most likely date from to the second half of the first millennium BCE, are of the type on The International Council of Museum's 'Emergency Red List of Cultural Objects at Risk'. They were discovered by an archaeology enthusiast in an interior design shop in east London, and recovered by The Metropolitan Police's Art and Antiques Unit, which investigates art theft, illegal trafficking, and fraud.

The agreement, signed today by the Director of the V&A, Dr Tristram Hunt, and Dr Yassin Saeed Noman Ahmed, Ambassador for the Republic of Yemen based in the UK, sees the V&A take responsibility for the care of the stelae on a temporary basis, until the Republic of Yemen deems it is safe to return the objects to their country of origin.

While at the museum, the team will research the four carved stone funerary stelae ahead of a new rotating *Culture in Crisis* display at V&A East Storehouse opening in 2025.

The agreement is unique, in that in most similar cases, objects might be stored by museums for a short time before being transferred to their country of origin. This partnership enables further research and conservation, with the unique potential for the objects to also be enjoyed by the public.

Dr Tristram Hunt, Director of the V&A, said: *“We are delighted to collaborate with the Republic of Yemen’s Embassy in the UK and The Metropolitan Police’s Art and Antiques Unit to store, research and display these four incredible ancient carved funerary stelae. This is an historic agreement that will give the public the chance to appreciate these exceptional examples of Yemeni culture and creativity, before the objects are repatriated, and shine a light on how the V&A’s Culture in Crisis programme helps curtail the illegal trade of looted objects and the preservation of cultural heritage worldwide.”*

Commander Clayman, Central Specialist Crime, Metropolitan Police, said: *“The Art and Antiques Unit seized these four stelae from a shop in London following information received from a concerned member of the public. The police investigation established that they are ancient archaeological artefacts from Yemen, and came from necropoli that have been subjected to looting in recent years. When the seller was given this information they made the generous decision to disclaim them, and asked for them to be returned to Yemen. I am pleased that we have been able to achieve this today. I hope that when these pieces go on display at V&A East Storehouse, they may encourage people to consider antiquities from a legal perspective as well as an aesthetic one. By establishing an artefact’s provenance before purchase they may avoid inadvertently fuelling the demand for stolen cultural goods. The Art and Antiques Unit would like to thank everyone who contributed to the investigation and this positive outcome.”*

Charles Harper, UK Chargé d'affaires and Deputy Ambassador to Yemen, said: *“Arts and culture can play an important role in rebuilding a society from conflict and this agreement is a fantastic way to ensure Yemeni culture remains in Yemeni care. The war has taken a devastating toll on Yemenis. The UK will continue to support UN-led efforts to bring about a sustainable and inclusive peace in Yemen.”*

The forthcoming display at V&A East Storehouse is curated by Georgia Haseldine, Senior Curator, V&A East Storehouse, in collaboration with Laura Searson, the V&A’s Cultural Heritage Preservation Lead. The display will tell the story of these unique objects, alongside an overview of the work the V&A does promoting and protecting cultural heritage around the world. Established in 2015, the V&A’s Culture in Crisis Programme brings together those protecting cultural heritage, and has for many years worked closely to support the Metropolitan Police, as well as law-enforcement around the world, to help prevent the illicit trade of cultural artefacts.

Opening in 2025, V&A East Storehouse is one of two new V&A East sites currently under construction in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. V&A East Storehouse will be a

unique new cultural experience giving unprecedented access to the V&A's collections. A working collection store open to the public year-round, it will take visitors behind the scenes to encounter their national collections at a scale and in ways never possible before.

V&A East Storehouse brings together conservation labs, working stores, research and reading rooms with galleries, display and performance spaces and creative studios, inviting visitors to wander from the Collections Hall, a dramatic central hall, along an extensive self-guided route through the collections, revealing life behind the scenes at the V&A.

V&A East Storehouse and V&A East Museum are both part of East Bank, the UK's newest cultural quarter at the heart of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, representing the biggest ever cultural investment by the Mayor of London, with support from HM Government and the four Olympic boroughs.

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Notes to Editors

For further PRESS information about V&A East Storehouse and the V&A's Culture in Crisis programme, please contact Laura Mitchell on l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk / press.office@vam.ac.uk or 020 3949 4509 (not for publication). A selection of press images is available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk.

About V&A East

One of the UK's most significant new museum projects, V&A East celebrates global creativity and builds on the V&A's long-standing heritage in east London and founding mission to make the arts accessible to all. Currently under construction in Stratford's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, V&A East encompasses two new sites – V&A East Storehouse at Here East and V&A East Museum on the Stratford Waterfront, both opening in spring 2025.

vam.ac.uk/east

About the V&A's Culture in Crisis Programme

The V&A is an international organisation with collections from around the globe. It is committed to protecting the world's cultural heritage and supporting communities that suffer cultural loss, whether through conflict, criminal acts or the impacts of the climate crisis. Established in 2015, the V&A's Culture in Crisis programme brings together those with a shared interest in protecting cultural heritage, providing a forum for sharing information, inspiring and supporting action and raising public awareness. vam.ac.uk/info/culture-in-crisis/

About East Bank

East Bank is the UK's newest cultural quarter at the heart of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. The place where everything happens – entertainment, inspiration and discovery – and open to everyone who visits, lives and works in East London. It is a unique collaboration between cultural institutions, world-leading universities and the people of the Olympic boroughs.

Comprising V&A East, Sadler's Wells East, UAL's London College of Fashion, UCL East (University College London) and the new BBC Music studios, East Bank will begin to open up from autumn 2023, with UCL's Marshgate campus and UAL's London College of Fashion opening their doors to students.

The scheme, driven with significant backing and funding from the Mayor of London and support from HM Government and the four Olympic boroughs, will provide skills and jobs for local people, bring over 10,000 students to the site, and attract thousands of visitors from London and beyond. East Bank will help cement the capital's reputation as a world leader in culture, education and innovation, creating 2,500 jobs, £1.5 billion of economic benefit and 600 new homes.

East Bank is rooted in the diverse communities of East London and is a reflection of the creative spirit of the Olympic boroughs and the legacy of the 2012 Games. For over a decade, East Bank institutions have worked with communities across East London to ensure they benefit from the £1.1 billion investment.

East Bank will build on the area's existing creative and innovation credentials, and East Bank partners have been building relationships and delivering projects with the thriving arts, fashion, education and community organisations based in the area, including the artistic community in Hackney Wick, East London Dance, Theatre Royal Stratford East, Studio Wayne McGregor and many more.