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Lack of space at the British Museum sees major loan of Assyrian collection to Getty

Since the closure of a basement gallery in 2006 there is little room to store the whole collection

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The Banquet Scene relief from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, Iraq (around 645 BC) is widely regarded as the world's finest single relief panel from Assyria © The Trustees of the British Museum

The British Museum is to lend an "important group" of Assyrian sculpted reliefs to the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles for three years because it lacks the funds to create an adequate display space for all of its outstanding collection. The loan will include the *Banquet Scene*, which is widely regarded as the world's finest single relief panel from Assyria.

The Los Angeles show, *Assyria: Palace Art of Ancient Iraq* (from 2 October), will comprise 12 large gypsum panels like those destroyed by Islamic State extremists in Iraq in 2015. The sculptures on loan date from the ninth to seventh centuries BC and were excavated at Nimrud, Nineveh and Khorsabad in the mid-19th century. None is on display at the British Museum, following the closure of a basement gallery in 2006.

Although the *Banquet Scene* was shown in the British Museum's major Ashurbanipal exhibition last winter, it has otherwise not been seen in the UK for 13 years. The museum does not discuss the value of artefacts, but this single panel alone is believed to be worth around £100m. While the Getty Foundation is one of the most generous donors to museums worldwide, no fee or quid pro quo is being disclosed.

The British Museum has 240 Assyrian panels on display, with a further 80 in storage. A museum spokeswoman says that "we want to share some of the collection through national and international loans", adding that a longer term redisplay of the full Assyrian collection "will form part of the museum's masterplan and redevelopment", yet to be finalised. The plan will then need approval from the trustees and enormous funds will have to be raised. Even when work begins, the building will need to be reinstalled as a rolling project, with the whole process taking well over a decade and possibly much longer. Creating the space to display all of the Assyrian reliefs is therefore many years away—hence the Getty loan. In the meantime, the museum's priority is its archaeological storage facility outside Reading, which is due to be completed in 2023.