

Art Student Pulls Off a (Very Brief) Coin Heist at the British Museum

The artist aimed to use sleight of hand to point to what he described as the museum's problematic legacy of colonial-era acquisitions.



A scan of the original coin being manipulated by the artist. Ilê Sartuzi



By **Sarah Hurtes**

Reporting from London

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A Brazilian artist strolled into the British Museum last month and approached a table where visitors are allowed to interact with historic objects. After handling a 17th-century British coin for a moment, he seemingly returned it and moved on, like thousands of other visitors.

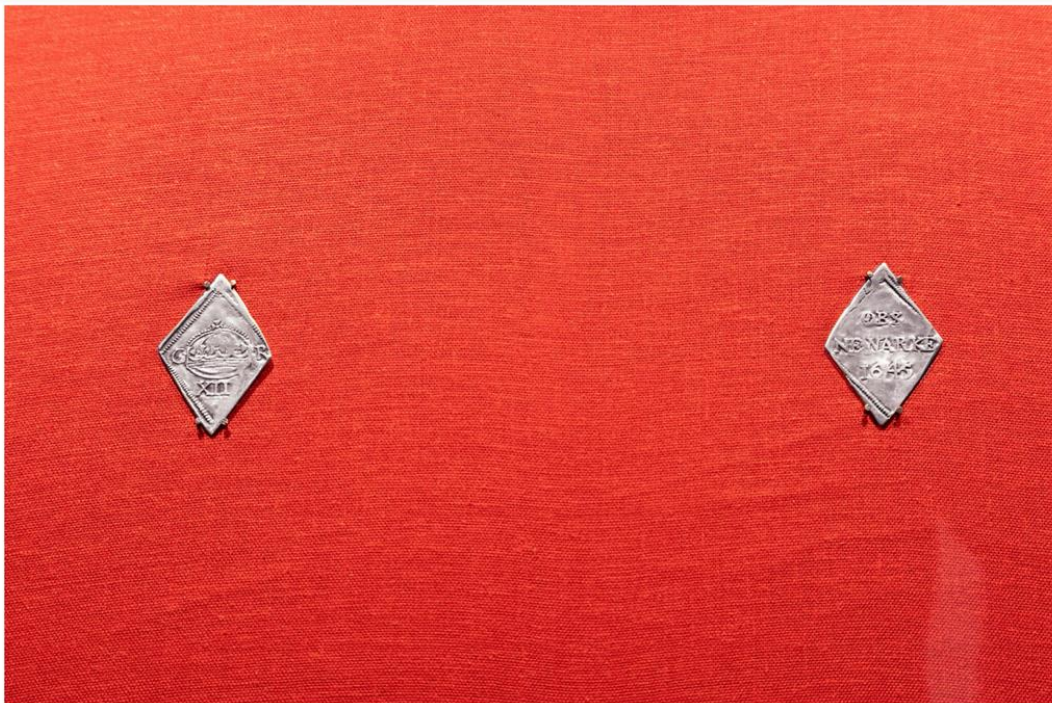
Only last week did the museum discover — through the artist's Instagram page — that he had replaced a genuine coin with his own replica and discarded the real artifact in the museum's donation box on his way out.

The act was the culmination of a more-than-yearlong project by Ilê Sartuzi, an art student at Goldsmiths, University of London. To briefly steal the coin, he used the type of sleight of hand often associated with magicians to draw parallels to what he called the “trickery” of the museum’s display of objects with contested provenance.

“The gesture of stealing as a central part of the project brings back the heated discussion about the role of looting in the museum’s foundation,” Mr. Sartuzi said.

The museum has long faced criticism regarding its acquisition methods. Several [nations have sought the return](#) of particular objects in the museum’s exhibits and questioned [the legitimacy of its collections](#). This latest stunt did not seem to resonate with the museum.

“It’s a tired argument,” said Connor Watson, the museum’s spokesman. “We’re quite open about what is looted and what is a contested object.”



Two fake coins in a museum display. Ilê Sartuzi

Mr. Sartuzi’s stunt also recalled [an embarrassing scandal from last year](#), when the museum said a former curator stole more than 1,800 items from its storerooms.

While the museum called the incident “disappointing” and “derivative,” Mr. Watson said the incident broke no law. “There’s no issue of theft here.”

Originally from a Brazilian island, Mr. Sartuzi, 28, came to London in 2022 to study art at Goldsmiths. His first visit to the British Museum left a strong impression.

It was on March 20 last year, he said, and he was surprised to see a man behind a table in the money section, showing coins to visitors and telling stories about them, part of the museum’s “Hands on Desks” program.

He was struck by the resemblance of the museum’s coin display to the setup of street magicians. With this image in his head, he aimed to perform a magic trick that he said would challenge the ethics of these “universal exhibitions,” and would question the provenance and rightful ownership of artifacts acquired during periods of colonialism.



The British Museum in January. Andrew Testa for The New York Times

After consulting an art lawyer to see what was legally possible, he decided to swap a civil war-era silver coin from England — “one of the few British things in the British Museum,” he said — for a replica made by fellow art students.

He said he visited the museum 20 times to plan his stunt meticulously, analyzing its architectural plans and floors. “I was weirdly walking around the museum, counting my steps,” he said.

But things didn’t go as planned on June 17, the day of his scheduled performance. The volunteer who gave him the coin asked to see both of his hands, and he couldn’t execute the switch.

Mr. Sartuzi returned the next day, after shaving his beard to avoid being recognized. He discreetly replaced the coin with a fake and dropped the real one in the donation box downstairs on his way out. Three students filmed his actions to document it as part of his final year project.



A 3-D rendering of the digital model of the coin used in the project. Ilê Sartuzi

Richard Noble, the head of Goldsmiths’ art department, said he and his colleagues were impressed by the project and felt it resonated with issues of cultural imperialism. Professor Noble said it fell “within the remit of what we would term institutional critique.” The project received “a very high mark.”

As to whether the 1645 silver coin had been found, Mr. Watson said he believed it had been located and was being kept securely.