

Brazilian artist swaps historical coin in British Museum for a fake

Ilê Sartuzi put original coin in museum donation box as part of project about number of foreign objects in its collection



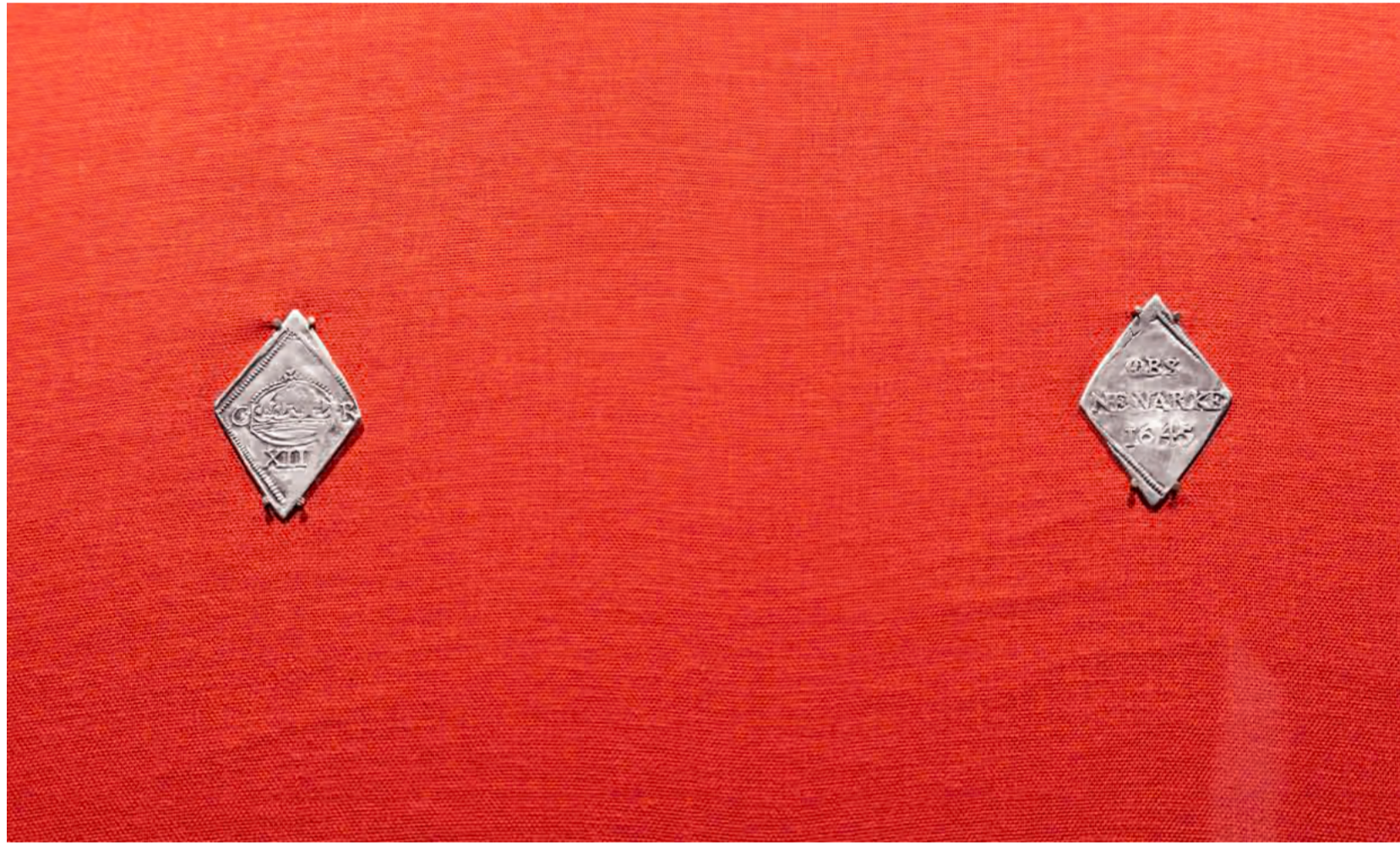
The stunt happened less than a year after hundreds of items were found to have gone missing from the museum. Photograph: Hollie Adams/Reuters

An artist took a historical coin from its display case in the [British Museum](#) and deposited it in a donation box in the museum's lobby as part of an art project - less than a year after hundreds of items were found to have gone missing from the museum.

Last month, the Brazilian conceptual artist Ilê Sartuzi swapped an English civil war coin for a fake as part of a project highlighting the large number of foreign objects the British Museum holds.

Sartuzi said the idea came to him when he saw a museum volunteer handing visitors coins to handle. He asked for the 17th-century silver coin because "it is one of the few British things in the British Museum" and created a diversion while he swapped it for the fake.

He then deposited the original coin in the museum's collection box on the way out.



Two fake coins, like that used by the artist, in a museum display case at Goldsmiths Photograph: courtesy of the artist

Sartuzi filmed the entire act and recounted it in a video made for his master's degree at Goldsmiths, University of [London](#). He said he had planned the stunt for more than a year.

The video, filmed by three friends of the artist, showed him being caught by a volunteer guide before successfully attempting the theft again the next day, [the Art Newspaper reported](#).

Sartuzi said he shaved his beard to avoid being recognised by museum security and was able to swap the coins with the aid of a momentary diversion.



The Brazilian conceptual artist Ilê Sartuzi swapped an English civil war coin for a fake Photograph: courtesy of the artist

The British Museum said it would inform police about the incident. "This is a disappointing and derivative act that abuses a volunteer-led service aimed at giving visitors the opportunity to handle real items and engage with history," a museum spokesperson said.

"Services like this rely on a basic level of human decency and trust, and it would be a shame to have to review the provision of these services due to actions like this."

Sartuzi said institutions such as the British Museum and France's Louvre viewed themselves as the "holders of the treasures of humanity", adding: "The problem is that these institutions are the basis of imperialist cultures that looted a lot of these objects from the global south and world."

The coin in question is from 1645 and was minted in Newark, England. It is not registered in the museum's database but is part of its handling collection, which was founded in 2000 to offer visitors the chance to touch historical objects under the supervision of volunteers.

The artist and his lawyer claim his actions therefore do not violate museum policies prohibiting the handling of objects or removal from the premises, nor do they fall under the Theft Act of 1968.

The incident comes almost a year after the [theft of hundreds of objects including coins and jewellery](#) from the British Museum's collection was revealed, which led to the resignation of its director, Hartwig Fischer, who was in no way implicated in the theft. The [museum also dismissed an employee](#) and ordered a review of its security.

Sartuzi said the scandal was an "unfortunate coincidence". He said the British Museum was "a foundational part of the colonial, imperialist system" and noted that the coin he swapped was the only one of British origin on display for handling at the time.

The British Museum has been under scrutiny over the way it acquired some of the artefacts it holds, with some countries asking for pieces to be returned. These include the [Parthenon marbles](#) and bronzes looted by British troops in 1897 from the former west African kingdom of Benin.