

The Parthenon Marbles: Refuting the Arguments

by Dr. Tom Flynn

The pressure on Western encyclopedic or 'universal' museums to address the repatriation of cultural objects unethically removed from their countries of origin during the age of imperialism is growing ever stronger. The museums, in their efforts to resist, continue to cleave to the argument that return of even one significant object or set of objects would inevitably "open the floodgates" leading to the wholesale denuding of the world's great museum collections.

This argument is fallacious since it implies that the majority of museum collections were unethically acquired, which is not the case. It succeeds, however, in deflecting attention away from the dubious circumstances in which certain objects were removed from their rightful homes. Few cases are more significant in this respect than the Parthenon Marbles in London. For this reason they are of pivotal importance for the future of international cultural diplomacy.

In its effort to counter mounting public pressure to return the Parthenon Marbles to Athens, the British Museum has used a range of arguments over the years, all of which can be refuted. This perhaps explains why majority public opinion continues to favour the reunification of the Marbles as the right thing to do. Through its continuing resistance, the British Museum is failing to honour the public trust.

Outlined below are the main arguments used by the British Museum to keep the Marbles in London and the counter-arguments which support the calls for return.

1. Lord Elgin "rescued" the Marbles by removing them to safety in Britain

An argument consistently promoted by the British Museum and supported by Julien Anfruns, Director-General of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Despite ICOM's supposed impartiality in matters of delicate cultural diplomacy, Anfruns told the Spanish journal *La Nueva España*: "Had the transfer never happened, who knows if we would be able to see these pieces today at all." In fact, the Marbles that Lord Elgin did not "transfer" to Britain and which remained in Athens, survived remarkably well and have benefited from responsible cleaning by Greek conservators using state of the art laser technology. In contrast, the Marbles retained by the British Museum were scrubbed with wire brushes in the 1930s by British Museum staff in a misguided attempt to make them whiter.

2. Lord Elgin "legally" acquired the Marbles and Britain subsequently "legally" acquired them from him for the British Museum

In the absence of unequivocal documentary proof of the actual circumstances under which Lord Elgin removed the Marbles, the legality of Britain's acquisition of them will always be in doubt. More importantly, the fact that permission to remove them was granted not by the Greeks but by the Ottoman forces occupying Greece at that time undermines the legitimacy of Elgin's actions and thus by extension Britain's ownership.

3. Lord Elgin's removal of the Marbles was archaeologically motivated

Lord Elgin's expressed intention was always to transport the Marbles to his ancestral seat in Scotland where they would be displayed as trophies in the tradition established by aristocratic collectors returning from the Grand Tour. Nobody with genuine archaeological interest in ancient Greek sculpture would ever have countenanced the disfiguring of such a beautiful and important ancient monument in the way Lord Elgin did. For archaeologists, an object's original context is paramount. It is telling that Lord Elgin's son, James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin, was responsible for ordering the destruction of the Old Summer Palace in Beijing during the Second Opium War of 1860. Philistine disregard for the world's cultural monuments seems to run in the family.

4. The Greeks are unable to look after the Parthenon Marbles properly

The New Acropolis Museum in Athens is a world-class museum with first-rate conservation and curatorial expertise. It is the most appropriate place in the world in which to display the Parthenon Marbles. Its proximity to the ancient monument — and the masterful disposition of the New Acropolis Museum's Parthenon Galleries on the same architectural axis as the Parthenon itself — would return to the Marbles some measure of their architectural significance. While they remain in London, this aspect of their importance is steadily being erased from the cultural memory.

5. It is impossible to restore the Parthenon and thus the aspiration towards 'reunification' is a false one

Restoration of the structural fabric of Parthenon temple continues apace. However, the aspiration has never been to return the frieze, pediment and metopes to the original building but rather to reunify them within the New Acropolis Museum where they can be properly appreciated and understood in the context of the original building, and preserved for posterity. In London they are willfully decontextualised and misleadingly displayed with no relation to Greek artistic or cultural history.

6. The Marbles are better off in London where they can be seen in the context of other world cultures

Research on museum visitors has concluded that the average visitor does not make meaningful connections between the randomly acquired objects held and displayed by encyclopedic museums. Indeed, when given the choice between viewing the Parthenon Marbles within the artificial environment applied to them by British Museum curators and experiencing them in the city of Athens from which they originate, polls consistently demonstrate that the majority of the public would prefer to see them returned to Athens.

7. The Marbles belong to "the world", to all of us, and should therefore be left where "everyone" can enjoy them

Now that Athens has a world-class, state-of-the-art museum in which to house the Marbles, there is no longer any justification for assuming that London is the best place for the people of the world to enjoy them. Since its opening, the New Acropolis Museum has enjoyed huge visitor numbers. It is therefore reasonable to assume that visitor numbers would increase still further were the Parthenon Marbles to be reunited in the New Acropolis Museum. Moreover, Greece is in dire need of a boost to its cultural tourism, which the return of the Marbles would help it to achieve. Anyone comparing the New Acropolis Museum, bathed as it is in Attic light, with the gloomy Duveen Galleries in the British Museum would reasonably conclude that "enjoyment" of the Marbles would be immeasurably enhanced were they returned to Athens.

8. If the British Museum agreed to return the Marbles to Athens, it would set a dangerous precedent that would "open the floodgates", leading to the denuding of the world's encyclopedic museums

For European and North American museums to suggest that they would be denuded is tantamount to admitting that the majority of their collections were dubiously acquired, which is not the case. It is therefore nonsense to suggest that museums would be emptied. Every request for repatriation should be treated on its own merits. The great encyclopedic or 'universal' museums in London, Paris, Berlin, New York and elsewhere are all subject to the laws laid down within internationally agreed legal instruments such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the safeguarding of cultural property. Refusing to return the Marbles sends the wrong message at a time when a more ethical approach is required over disputed cultural objects.

9. The Marbles are too important a part of the British Museum collection to allow them to be given up

The most important part of the British Museum's work in the future will be the fostering of creative cultural partnerships with other nations. These can lead to groundbreaking exhibitions such as the Terracotta Army from China and Moctezuma from Mexico. Returning the Parthenon Marbles would open a new chapter in cooperative relations with Greece and enable visitors to the British Museum to see new objects loaned by Greek museums. Refusal to return the Marbles is hampering this process. The Parthenon Marbles display in the Duveen Galleries at the British Museum could be reconfigured using high-quality casts, properly lit. The decision to return the Marbles to Athens would be seen as the British Museum leading the way in enlightened cultural diplomacy, the benefits of which would be diverse, long-term, and far-reaching.

10. The Marbles can only be "loaned" to Athens if the Greeks agree to concede Britain's legal ownership of the sculptures

Attaching such a precondition to a dispute over cultural property has been widely viewed as insulting and condescending and reminiscent of colonialist approaches to international relations. Seemingly intractable cultural disputes require both parties to adopt a spirit of open-minded generosity and to enter into discussions on equal terms and with no preconditions.

11. "The Elgin Marbles are no longer part of the story of the Parthenon. They are now part of another story." (Neil MacGregor, Director, British Museum)

It is not the role of museums to rewrite history to further their own nationalistic ends. As their correct name makes clear, the Parthenon Marbles are, and will always be, integral to the story of the Parthenon, one of the finest cultural achievements bequeathed to humankind by the ancient Greeks.

Have we missed anything? Ah, yes, the sun shines more frequently in Athens. Case closed.

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