

## A Citizens' Matter: Turning Marble Back to Sculpture

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The quality of our life is very much affected by achievements and deeds accomplished in a state. Every day, citizens enjoy ideas compacted into material form, in creations that embody an exceptional design, bringing inspiring insights and often spiritual growth. Even more so, when such creations extend to reach people far beyond their physical presence, then their impact becomes transcultural and monumental. It is such monuments, exceptional designs, which bridge the world, as we touch it, with the world as we think about it. These reference points deliver their contained vision only when read by the viewer. It is the ability *to see the whole picture*, read it and interpret it that renders such designs a living entity in dialogue with the viewer.

The very concept of being a *citizen* is an idea that originated in the ancient Greek world, born in the *city-states* and saved as a concept and function to our days. In its expression and realisation, it has also left material 'footprints', achievements, which we can actually touch and see. Common coinage, for example, is a tangible expression of shared citizenship within a geographical region. Pericles, the political leader of ancient Athens in its 'golden age', melted coins of different origins to circulate a common coin to support common citizenship within the Athenian state. Today, the same step has been taken in the European Union, reflecting, in tangible terms, the agreed common citizenship amongst most of the European states. Other uniting links are represented in shared words or symbols which reveal the outcome of common *education*, like mathematical symbols, historical names or concepts.

The advancement of human civilisation, self-catalysed on the basis of memory and previous accomplishments, takes place, as long as these previous achievements are readable and comprehensible. Any assault on an existing inherited achievement represents an assault on the infinite possibilities of progress that would have been otherwise catalysed in an unpredictable number of persons, directly, and from them, indirectly, to even more individuals. Today, there is an institutional approach to this idea, in the form of World Heritage protection. Thus, in acknowledgement of the value that each piece of heritage of humanity has on the progress of humanity itself, there is a global effort, orchestrated by UNESCO, to identify and protect those *bridges* of past and future, communication and advancement.

The Acropolis, the famous complex of buildings and temples in the heart of Athens, was also created at the time of Pericles, and was the result of a construction programme that aimed to present *achievement* in its time. The Parthenon, the most central and best-known temple of the Acropolis was the outcome of one project, employing thematic units harmoniously integrated in a single design. Created in honour of *Athena*, the goddess of Wisdom, it was adorned with magnificent sculptures, all part of a central design employing exemplary architecture, sophisticated engineering and fine art in the formation of a monument of unique splendor. In recognition of the excellence, historic value, symbolism, and global impact of the Acropolis of Athens, UNESCO has previously stated that "the Acropolis [...] can be seen as symbolizing the idea of World Heritage".

In natural extension of its excellent architectural and artistic execution, the *meaning contained* in the Parthenon, the collective idea conveyed in its complete thematic design, renders it even today an exceptional accomplishment for further advancement of society. The Parthenon continues to stand for the very achievements that gave rise to it, in all the scientific, artistic and philosophical disciplines that

flourished and enabled its realisation at the time. It is a design by citizens for citizens. Made of fine, white marble, it was sculpted to create a *monument* of spiritual lead and wisdom, which it literally housed.

One of the most tragic moments in art history, which took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the brutal removal of more than half of the Parthenon sculptures from the Acropolis by the British ambassador to the Ottoman empire, was later concluded by the *purchase of culture* by the British Museum. In a few years, after their looting, the atrocious deed of what we would refer to as theft today, grossly reduced the Sculptures of the Parthenon to individualised pieces disgracefully called ‘elgin marbles’. Stripped of their original position and context, and ignorantly treated to irreversible physical damage, the Sculptures of the Parthenon are the missing pieces of the original work of art that continues to stand in the heart of Athens today, 2,500 years on.

The assault committed against the Parthenon continues to happen every day. Every moment that the Sculptures are ‘marbles’, hundreds of miles away from the actual monument, one of the most unique achievements, the definitive monument of World Heritage, is in severe damage. And thus, it remains unreadable and incomprehensible. The possibilities of understanding and advancement that would have been otherwise catalysed by a complete Parthenon are being severely blocked by the British Museum, who arrogantly retain the individualised ‘marbles’ in the British state. But how does this promote the global message intended to be conveyed by the temple in its totality? I cannot actually see the layout of the temple in the British Museum, the ‘marbles’ are arrayed *outside in*. How could I recognise a face, if I were to make a cast of it and look at it from the inside? I fail to grasp the overall interconnectedness of the Sculptures, I couldn’t care less about a proud demonstration of art “acquisition”. It is my will and right, as a citizen, to be inspired by the *achievement* of my European ancestors, who designed the sacred temple to be *seen in understanding*, not become *unreadable* with its pages torn out, shuffled and scattered.

People have protested and fought and died for citizenship and democracy. Today, it is a global claim of the *majority* of the civilised world that the Parthenon Sculptures be reunited at the location where the original monument continues to stand. I often wonder surprised, trying to solve the most obvious question: How can a museum demonstrate the attitude of ‘I own this and I will do whatever I want with it’, instead of doing what is correct to restore an international monument? Because keeping apart the pieces of a grand creation, as unique as the Parthenon, is a crime against art. The British Museum and British government have no God-given role of playing cultural disseminators to the public. Actually, they are proving exactly the opposite in their childishly stubborn yet eloquent arrogance. If they know their job as museum professionals at the British Museum and if the British government knows its role as a power in civilised and united Europe, they should also know that culture is displayed by its own value, culture is not bought, and it does not need to be housed in a gallery of ownership or prestige. Because, let’s stop hiding, it is common knowledge in the international community that it all comes down to maintaining an image. This situation, however, is increasingly working against this ‘supreme’ image, bringing severe repercussions instead, in the form of bad press and embarrassment to the British nation.

There are facts that the British government cannot neglect any more. The world wants the sculptures brought together at their rightful place. Official polls have shown this. The British public wants it too. But most importantly, beyond institutions and big words, Britain is a friend of Greece. British people are friends of the Greeks. How can the government of a friendly country hold such a highly provocative point of dispute pending? I recall the difficulty with which my excellent British friends addressed the issue in our truly friendly and well-intentioned conversations, and I felt really bad for the position in

which their own government had brought them. At the same time, I could feel very proud of my British friends, for knowing inside them the true and the correct. In this sense, I consider the education system of the UK to be successful. Yet I would imagine that one of the biggest museums in the same country, an institution with a supposed educational mission, would also act so as to convey the same education and understanding to these citizens. To seed appreciation of art, to inspire unity, as opposed to promoting national ownership or cultural division. Because to keep the symbol of World Heritage fragmented is to undermine the citizens' unity itself.

All the arguments for the retention of the Parthenon sculptures in London, put forward by the British government and the British Museum, seem pale and awfully poor, compared to the validity, simplicity and coherence of reuniting now the pieces of a masterpiece where the original monument is. The New Acropolis Museum is ready at the foot of the Acropolis in Athens and in direct view of the Parthenon itself. It offers literally the optimum physical and conceptual conditions for the *meaningful display* of all the Parthenon sculptures, together, as one complete exhibit.

Noble gestures of true appreciation of art increasingly recover the picture of the monument in Athens. In 2006, the University of Heidelberg returned a piece of the Parthenon frieze to Greece, opening the possibility for an exhibit loan in place of the artefact recovered. In the same year, a Swedish citizen returned a piece of the Acropolis' Erechtheion temple, acquired some 110 years ago, restoring yet another part of the Acropolis. And it was only last month when Italy raised the issue again, returning a piece of the frieze to be displayed in the New Acropolis Museum in Athens. Antiquity recovery is increasingly becoming reality, in a contemporary vision of museum transparency, respect and justice. When will it be your turn, Britain? I can see the day when the sculptures are reunited in Athens again; there are people whose spirit will awaken in every single face, gesture, expression and harmonious curve in the sculptures. Pericles, Phidias, Iktinos, Kallikrates, names of citizens with a vision, creators of a monument we continue to look up to and *read* today. The people whose minds and hands turned marble to Sculpture are the very founders of the civilisation of our continent, of the framework within which we can hold dialogue today and join the best of our nature to elevate human thought and spirit.

The permanent reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures is the ultimate and best-known act of antiquity conservation currently awaiting execution. When the sculptures are reunited, the dispute between the two fellow European states will give place to the opening of a new era of communication and cultural exchange within our community of European citizens. Because *citizenship* is based on understanding and respectful coexistence, and it should promote individual advancement and that of the state. This is what a museum is expected to say. This is what the British government and British Museum are yet to tell. Then, rewarded in a unique moment in history of civilisation, they will become part of the honoured history of the Parthenon, participants of a new accomplishment. They will receive the gratitude of Phidias' creation for their seeing of a vision depicted in sculpture for humanity. And so will every citizen of the world.

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