

No Excuses Left

by Dennis Menos

The British Museum has no excuses left to justify its continued retention of the Parthenon Sculptures.

There was a time when it could claim that returning the sculptures to Athens was ill-advised because the city lacked a suitable museum. With the completion of the New Acropolis Museum, however, including its spectacular Parthenon Gallery which is universally acknowledged to be superior to Duveen at the British Museum, it can no longer use that excuse.

Then, there was the tale about the so-called constraints by the British Museum Act of 1963, which presumably prevented the Museum Trustees from acting. But that excuse similarly lost its credibility, when Parliament in 2006 circumvented the provisions of the Museum Act to allow the return to Australia of certain human remains in the possession of the British Museum. If a way could be found to return the human remains to Australia -- notwithstanding the provisions of the Museum Act -- one certainly can be found to return home to Athens the Parthenon Sculptures.

The British Museum's other pretext, that the Parthenon Sculptures cannot be returned to Athens because they are "part of the unique overview of world civilizations that the British Museum exists to present," has never been taken seriously by anyone. The British Museum has on display numerous other examples of Greek classical art with which to demonstrate Greece's contribution to world civilizations. It does not necessarily need the Parthenon Sculptures for that purpose.

Which brings us, to the least convincing argument that the British Museum uses to justify its continued retention of the sculptures. The claim, that the Museum Trustees (!!!) rather than the people of Greece are the actual owners of the sculptures. How can a Museum in London claim legal title to sculptures created by Phidias twenty-four centuries ago to decorate the temple to Goddess Athena on the Acropolis in Athens? The sculptures happen to be in the British Museum only because of the heinous crime against the temple committed by Lord Elgin. Does that crime grant the Museum claim of ownership?

Clearly, the British Museum is at a dead end when it comes to offering a plausible excuse for retaining the Parthenon Sculptures. None of the ones it has used in the past have any credibility left.

The time has come for the British Museum Trustees to recognize that the era of bogus excuses and tales has passed. The Parthenon Sculptures have no place being in London. Admitting this plain fact to the people of Britain and to the world is long overdue.

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