

## **An Act of Justice: Reuniting the Parthenon Marbles in Athens**

The abuse and the damages to Pheidias' masterpieces in the British Museum are long-standing and on-going, while their "safe-keeping" there has proven to be disastrous and dangerous

BY DR LINA MENDONI, MINISTER OF CULTURE

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The unprecedented episode of the theft of hundreds of valuable objects from the British Museum, perpetrated by those commissioned to protect its collections, in addition to the question of criminal and moral responsibilities, also raises the major issue of the credibility of the Museum itself. At the same time, yet again, the latest argument put forward by the British side, that the Parthenon Marbles are supposedly more secure in this Museum than they are in the Acropolis Museum in Athens, is crumbling to pieces.

In their First Leader of 26 August, the London "Times" – which had been opposed to the return of the Sculptures to Greece for fifty years but are now ardent supporters of their return and reunification in Athens – harshly criticises the British Museum, pointing out that the international reputation of the Museum is at stake. Following the recent revelations, the Greeks demand for reunification would appear fully strengthened.

It is not the first time that the British side finds itself internationally exposed for the way it has treated Pheidias' masterpieces. The architectural sculptures of the major monument of Western Civilisation – the Parthenon – have been abused and destroyed, without any respect, in a violent and immoral way, from the time that they were stolen and vandalised by Lord Elgin, until today. No bona fide and objective observer has the slightest doubt about Elgin's motives and methods 200 years ago. It was a theft, accompanied by unprecedented vandalism, which caused incalculable damage and destruction to the monument itself, in addition to damage and irreversible damage to its physical, contextual and aesthetic integrity.

Edward Dodwell experienced Elgin's brutality firsthand: "During my first tour to Greece I had the inexpressible mortification of being present when the Parthenon was despoiled of its finest sculpture. I saw several metopæ at the south-east extremity of the temple taken down. They were fixed in between the triglyphs as in a groove; and in order to lift them up, it was necessary to throw to the ground the magnificent cornice by which they were covered. The south-east angle of the pediment shared the same fate". Dodwell's testimony is complemented by British Museum architect Robert Smirke: "It particularly affected me when I saw the destruction made to get down the basso-relievos on the walls of the frieze. Each stone as it fell shook the ground with its ponderous weight, with a deep hollow noise; it seemed like a convulsive groan of the injured spirit of the temple".

Greek Culture Minister Melina Mercouri, in her historic speech in 1986 at the Oxford Union debate on the Sculptures, presented with historical accuracy and eloquence all the barbaric acts of the glory- and money-hungry Lord. The 56 stones of the frieze were sawn or scraped off, so that their thickness did not exceed 18 cm, in order to allow their transport in the ships of the time.

The ship "Mentor", carrying 17 boxes of Sculptures, sank off the island of Kythira in September 1802. Their retrieval was completed two years later. But in some of them, already, the damage from erosion was irreversible. When the Sculptures arrived in England, Elgin stored them in damp and unsuitable sites. Finally, the Lord – acting as a looter – sold the Sculptures to the British Government, which entrusted them to the care of the British Museum, which, knowingly, accepted the products of the theft. The British Museum ignored the huge scandal that had broken out in British and international public opinion, the direct accusations and the strong protests of prominent personalities of the time throughout Europe. This is the position to which it adheres to this day.

From 1816 and for about a century, not only were they exposed to the extreme air pollution of the British capital, but also they were exhibited in a room heated by coal-burning chimneyless heaters. This resulted in the blackening and corrosion of their surface. The Sculptures were cleaned and washed in a thoroughly improper way twice after moulds had been taken from them, in 1817 and 1837, and several more times up until the 1930s.

In the 1930s, Lord Duveen employed agents, secretly, who used copper brushes and caustic materials to remove the ancient patina, as has been documented by William St. Clair in two of his books. However, "the scraping of the patina sometimes resulted, as one could expect, in the removal of the surface of the marble itself, especially in the most sensitive areas in terms of preservation. This fact is also attested by the examination of samples taken from the patina. Consequently, the anomaly that the scraping created on the surface of the marble had to be smoothed out according to the abovementioned aesthetic specifications. To ensure uniformity, this smoothing was also extended to surfaces that were free of patina. The project of smoothing the surfaces on the background of the high-reliefs and on the sculpted figures themselves increased the damage to the surfaces...". This led to a considerable - and in certain cases excessive - loss of material. "Some of the metopes represent glaring examples of this intervention. Thus, for instance, the reduced, because of grinding, surface of both the background and the figures of the high-relief is not only macroscopically visible but also, in certain cases, measurable", according to the preliminary report by the team of Greek experts, who examined the Sculptures in 1999, after negotiations between the Greek Ministry of Culture and the British Museum. Their "skin" was destroyed.

However, this was not the only case of ill-treatment of the Marbles. In the late 1960s, the British Museum's Conservation Section attempted extensive clean-ups to remove dirt and deposits. At that time, the surface of the Marbles was covered with diluted polyethylene glycol wax to facilitate future cleaning. Because of this, many of their delicate features are no longer discernible.

In 1961, two schoolboys began fighting and one fell on one of the marbles, knocking off part of a centaur's leg. The Museum's conservators were never able to completely repair the damage. In 1966 and 1970, vandals carved lines and letters into some of the pediment's sculptures. In 1974, thieves damaged a centaur's hoof while trying to remove the lead used to bind the stones together in ancient times.

In June 1981, a workman from the Property Services Agency, while being on the roof of the Duveen Gallery, lost his balance, dislodging a section of the glass roof, which fell onto a sculpture of the West Pediment. The accident caused "slight cracks and abrasions" to the sculpture.

Despite the secrecy of the British Museum at the time, the damage when revealed drew a response from its Director, Neil MacGregor, who commented that: "When you put sculpture on public show you expose it to damage. Every museum in the world that has sculpture on public show has a record of regular damage. Graffiti, scratching, bumping whatever. You simply cannot put sculpture on show at a level where people can see it to study it without accepting the risk. It's the price you pay for making it available".

To all this, we should add the highly problematic situation due to rainwater leaks from the roof in the Duveen Gallery, in 2019 and 2021, which fully confirms the lack of conservation of the British Museum's infrastructure.

It is evident that the leadership of the British Museum, as well as some politicians, lack a complete grasp of the significance and values that the specific works from Pericles' "Golden Age" contribute to Western Culture and the contemporary world. Otherwise, these matters would be treated with greater empathy and less arrogance. In 1997, Chris Smith, the UK's Culture Secretary, told British Museum Director Dr Robert Anderson: "Modern pollution on the Parthenon has caused tragic damage to those friezes which Lord Elgin did not remove... It is clear that the sculptures owned by the British Museum have benefited by being the property of the museum".

In 2002, Sir John Boyd, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum, noted in a letter to PM Tony Blair: "To remove any element of the collection - Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Indian, African, Mexican or Chinese - would be to dismember one of the very few places where the world can discover the world. This is a creative and living achievement of the Enlightenment. The Parthenon, on the other hand, is a ruin that can never now be restored".

Today, we witness the tragic episode of the theft from the British Museum, which is entrusted with the preservation and the security of its treasures. Following the extended and sorrowful saga of the Parthenon Sculptures housed in the British Museum, one asks oneself about the deeper causes of the theft. Could it be a lack of regard for the significance of these objects in the collection, or an undue haughtiness on the part of the authorities at this “Universal Museum”?

Does the present conduct of the British Museum’s trustees differ greatly from the unacceptable actions of Ian Jenkins, the former curator of its Greek Collections? Back in 1999, Jenkins audaciously displayed two photos of Iris’ head on the Museum’s official website. In one photo, the head bore black deposits. The other one was clean. In the caption, Jenkins noted: “Before cleaning, and after cleaning”, claiming that this had taken place in Athens. However, the truth is that the photo of Iris with the deposits was from a plaster cast, exhibited at the British Museum. The goddess’s pristine head has been safeguarded within the Acropolis Museum since 1889, after its detachment from a Byzantine wall on the Acropolis. Wasn’t Jenkins aware of these facts? Clearly, he was. He simply attempted to deceive the public, an act of fraud deemed unacceptable for a scientific curator of the British Museum.

The perpetual abuse and damage to the Parthenon Marbles at the British Museum are long-standing and ongoing. The recent spate of thefts apparently by the responsible curators, coupled with the silence of their heads, who neither take care to protect the collections nor ensure the appropriate security measures, prove that the “hospitality” provided to the masterpieces of Pheidias at the British Museum has always been inadequate, incomplete and problematic. The “safe-keeping” of the Sculptures at the British Museum is proving disastrous and dangerous. The urgent need for their reunification in Athens is now an act of Justice.

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