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The Parthenon Marbles at the British Museum: A Case Study for Reexamination and a "Forum Exhibition"

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In the fields of art history and classical studies, scholars have been increasingly calling for the reexamination of history and ownership of the so-called Elgin marbles, triggering varied reflections and responses from all sides. Among them is a claim made by the former Director of the British Museum Neil MacGregor: "The life of these objects as part of the story of the Parthenon is over. They can't go back to the Parthenon. They are now part of another story."[1] MacGregor implies that even though the Marbles were created for the Parthenon in Greece, their relocation to the British Museum in 1816 marked a new page in the "story" of the Parthenon Marbles, one that is entirely separate from their previous existence. By closely examining this British "part of the story," I explore the ways in which the British naturalized their ownership of the Marbles and forged new meanings around them. Overtime, Anglocentric discourses around the Parthenon Marbles came to dominate the epistemological field, excluding any additional facts about the objects' history and provenance. I also propose two possible solutions to the issue: 1) restitution of the Marbles back to Greece; and 2) using the "forum exhibition" format that I envision as a means of bringing to light the objects' complex history and offering a more nuanced and inclusive interpretation.

To understand the British "story" of the Parthenon Marbles, it is necessary to revisit the circumstances of their arrival in the United Kingdom and deposit at the British Museum. The Parthenon Marbles are panels of a sculpted frieze, metopes, and pediments, produced in the fifth century B.C. for the Parthenon temple, located on the Acropolis in Athens. Featuring a variety of sculptural elements and groups, the Marbles primarily depict scenes from myths and military conflicts, as well as images of local traditions. According to Tiffany Jenkins, in 1798, these delicate artworks aroused the interest of Thomas Bruce, the seventh Earl of Elgin and a British ambassador to the Ottoman government. He went to Greece, then under the Ottoman rule, to collect and ship materials from Athens to England. At the same time, the British Parliament passed an act that secured the purchase of the Marbles for "thirty-five thousand pounds," and the Parthenon Marbles were officially transferred to the British Museum on August 8, 1816.[2]

The architectural space of the British Museum is central to the process of naturalizing the British ownership of the Marbles. Designed by the architect Sir Robert Smirke in 1823, the Museum is an example of the Greek Revival style, which represents the European reimagination of Greek architecture.[3] The similarities between the architecture of the Parthenon and the British Museum are manifested in the use of pediments and column rows. The hidden quality of the cast-iron frame and concrete elements further erases any associations with modernity and makes the museum building appear to exist outside of its own time. The monochromatic exterior is also reminiscent of Greek and Roman architecture, white and unpainted, as it has existed in the European imagination since the Renaissance. In these respects, from the outset, the British Museum's building emulates the image of the Parthenon and forms a stylistic resonance with the Parthenon Marbles. This resonance is even more prominent in the Duveen Gallery, designed by John Russell Pope to hold the Marbles. The predominant use of the monochromatic stone is in line with the Neoclassical design of the whole building and serves to reaccentuate architectural features that are reminiscent of the Parthenon. Both the building and the gallery form visual connections with the Marbles, producing a sense of cultural resonance, and serving to naturalize the presence of the Parthenon Marbles within the British Museum.

The British ownership of the Marbles was also naturalized through the nineteenth-century discourse on race that drew connections between Ancient Greeks and nineteenth-century Northern Europeans. Robert Knox, one of the most prominent exponents of contemporary racial theories, claimed that, based on racial and physiognomic studies, "ancient Greeks had a northern Scandinavian or Saxon racial origin; more importantly, however, the classical 'racial' type can now be found not in Greece but the streets of London."[4] These racial theories promoted the idea of the British as descendants of the ancient Greeks and offered a rationale for owning the Parthenon Marbles. Furthermore, the British cultivated the idea of a separation between ancient Greeks and modern Greeks. The modern Greeks, in the nineteenth-century British imagination, were neglectful, as well as vulnerable.[5] In this view, when faced with the threat of the Ottoman rule, modern Greeks were unable to take on the task of protecting the classical masterpieces, further solidifying the notion that the modern Greeks were unworthy of the legacy of Ancient Greece.[6] By contrast, Britain, as the descendant of classical Athens, was able to rescue the classical masterpieces, including the Parthenon Marbles, from destruction by those "oriental barbarians," in Knox's words.[7] By claiming their duty to protect the Parthenon Marbles and insisting on their identity as descendants of classical Athens, the British built a cultural connection between the Marbles and the British Empire and supported the legitimacy of their removal from Greece. At the same time, according to sociologist Fiona Greenland, the central theme of the debate around the Parthenon Marbles lies in the tension between the particular and the universal, embodied in the idea of the Marbles as a shared heritage belonging to all human beings, as opposed to belonging to a specific nation.[8] The British Museum's website emphasizes the supranational status of the Parthenon Marbles: "The current division of the surviving sculptures between museums in eight countries, with about equal quantities present in Athens and London, allows different and complementary stories to be told about them, focusing respectively on their importance for the history of Athens and Greece, and their significance for world culture. This, the Museum's Trustees believe, is an arrangement that gives maximum public benefit for the world at large and affirms the universal nature of the Greek legacy."[9] This emphasis on the Parthenon Marbles as a shared cultural heritage sidesteps the discussion of national ownership and, thus, denies Greece's calls for repatriation.

To further naturalize the Parthenon Marbles' presence in the British Museum, the British also used names to legitimize their ownership. Since the Marbles come from Greece and the Parthenon, it seems reasonable to name them with a reference related to the place of their origin. However, when purchasing the Marbles, the Parliament made a specific stipulation: for the fragments to be kept together in the British Museum, where they should be "open to Inspection, and called by the name of 'The Elgin Marbles'."[10] The Marbles were thus not named after their place of origin or their style, but after the collector who acquired them. Therefore, Elgin, the hereditary British title, further emphasizes the British ownership of the Parthenon Marbles. Although today the Museum refers to the Marbles as the "Parthenon sculptures" on their official website, they continue to insist on the legitimacy of their ownership of the objects. Thus, the Trustees' statement accentuates the acquisition of the Marbles through a permit (*firman*), granted by the authorities of the Ottoman Empire.[11] The Trustees thus insist on the British ownership of the Marbles by letting the public be aware of this agreement, while refusing to acknowledge the complex power relationships that led to it.

The process of enacting and naturalizing their ownership of the Parthenon Marbles by the British also involved the objects' literal "whitewashing." As is evident in reproductions of the Marbles, they are gleamingly white. However, it appears that the Marbles were originally painted in a variety of colors. Although the Parthenon's exterior might have featured a variety of colors, it is certain that one of these colors was the Egyptian blue. According to the British Museum's official blog, traces of the Egyptian blue were found on the Marbles with the aid of infrared equipment.[12] The analysis also revealed that additional pigments were used on the Marbles (fig.1). This demonstrated that the Parthenon Marbles were originally linked to the idea of colorfulness, instead of whiteness. It was in 1937 that the Marbles acquired their current appearance. Lord Duveen encouraged and probably paid A. S. Holcombe and a group of masons to clean the objects with chisels and carborundum, in an attempt to make the Marbles whiter.[13] With this almost violent cleaning, the Parthenon Marbles attained their current monochromatic appearance, which associates them with whiteness. The erasure of color irrevocably altered the sculptures' individual characteristics, obliterating the figures' skin tones, hair and eye colors, etc. The cleaning thus further distanced the Marbles from their origin in the Ancient Mediterranean, instead of turning the sculptures into a universal representation, or, rather, into an image of the "white race."

While naturalizing the British ownership of the Parthenon Marbles, nineteenth-century popular discourses around the sculptures also generated new meanings and implications that fashioned the Marbles into a symbol of "British national pride" and "British superiority over France". Although today, the Marbles are fully integrated into the collection of the British Museum, initially, the sculptures attracted little attention from both the government and the general public.[14] According to Greenland, when the major portion of the Parthenon Marbles arrived in London in 1804, they "were rejected by the government and its cultural acquisitions advisers claimed them worthless."[15] However, over the course of the nineteenth century, an idea emerged that "the measure of a nation's seriousness lay in its cultural stock"[16]. This concept was quickly integrated into politics and led to the governments' increasing interest in antiquities.[17] Greenland argues that this process made the Marbles go from "worthless to priceless."[18] Termed by historians as the "art race," this competition between colonial powers led to the growing importance of public displays of art taken from other cultures as manifestations of the nation's political ambitions.[19] Within the framework of the "art race", the Parthenon Marbles became viewed as a great example of Ancient Greek aesthetics, distinct from more commonly available Roman art.[20] Seen as highly valuable Ancient Greek artifacts, the Marbles reinforced British cultural power as superior to that of other nations, thus becoming a symbol of British national pride. In particular, the Marbles figured prominently in the cultural competition between Britain and France. Lord Elgin's acquisition of the Marbles between 1798 and 1816 corresponds to the larger political climate of the Battle of Abukir in 1799 and 1801, the Battle of Alexandria in 1801, and the Napoleonic wars from 1803–1814, in which Britain was France's rival. According to historian Yannis Hamilakis, the socio-political climate drove Elgin to seek opportunities to get ahead of France outside the battlefield.[21] For him, antiquities and art collecting offered an important way of proving Gallic inferiority.[22] The British also promoted the notion of the Marbles as a symbol of British imperial power and superiority over France in the popular press of the time. An anonymous quote in *London Monthly Magazine* provides a good example: "I trust that this opportunity [to purchase Elgin's collection], to rival our neighbors on the Continent, will not be neglected. [. . .] Even the French, after all their depredations, must at a peace, submit to cross the Channel, if they wish to see such specimens of art, like Paris, with all its boasted splendor, cannot exhibit."[23] The emphasis on forcing the French to appreciate British cultural stocks, signifies the political significance of the Parthenon Marbles. It also demonstrates the place of the Parthenon Marbles in the discourse of British superiority.

The process of naturalizing the British ownership and the creation of new meanings around the Parthenon Marbles have situated them within an Anglocentric discourse that often omits facts and contradictory interpretations. First, since the "whitewashing" caused irreversible damage and altered the appearance of the sculptures, the Parthenon Marbles' original multichromatic appearance is often neglected in their descriptions, especially in popular publications.[24] The erasure prevents the viewers from understanding the role of gender, race, and class in the sculptures, originally communicated through colors. This deficiency prevents viewers from seeing and analyzing how identity boundaries are produced and re-produced, as well as how certain stereotypes are performed. The detailed description of colors is thus essential in constructing a fuller understanding of the Parthenon Marbles, and the issue should be called to attention. Second, since incompleteness would abate the greatness of the Parthenon Marbles, the museum descriptions present them as individual artworks instead of as "fragments of Parthenon", and hence neglect the marbles' important connections to architecture, for example, their position within architecture and lighting.[25] A more complete reference to the architectural space of the Parthenon would shed light on the architectural function of the Marbles. The site, on the other hand, is integral to the dynamic perception of the sculptures, with their appearance ever-changing due to varied light and atmospheric conditions over the duration of a day or a year. Therefore, these wider spaces and their importance for the way the Marbles were seen and understood, need to be well articulated through different interpretative means. By contrast, the current presentation by the British Museum offers an insufficient account of these contexts that precludes a comprehensive understanding of the Marbles.

Given the importance of reexamining the history of the Marbles and of creating a better "story" for them in the future, my first suggestion lies in the new interpretative possibilities offered by restitution. Firstly, compared to the British Museum, the Acropolis Museum, not surprisingly, is more willing to address the facts and interpretations that challenge the Anglocentric discourse. Secondly, the Acropolis Museum can offer viewers a more comprehensive picture of the marbles by showing them in proximity to the original site—the Parthenon. By placing the Parthenon Marbles near their original site, the public could have a better understanding of how the marbles were used, perceived, and functioned.

The Marbles in the collection of the Acropolis Museum would provide a broader visual and narrative context that would further facilitate the understanding of the Parthenon Marbles' imagery. Thirdly, in contrast to the British Museum, the Acropolis Museum is more likely to include the voices of scholars from the region. These scholars may provide different perspectives and different angles for the discussion of the Parthenon Marbles, which may lead to a more critical and productive consideration of these objects.

Although returning the Marbles to Greece will create new possibilities for interpretation and presentation, in reality, the reparation of the Parthenon Marbles remains a controversial issue. Having refuted calls for restitution in the past, the British Museum is more likely to reject similar requests in the future. My second suggestion thus shifts the attention from restitution to creating a more dynamic engagement between the public and the Parthenon Marbles and developing new possibilities for more engaged and informed interaction.

In 1972, Duncan Cameron, who was then the director of the Brooklyn Museum, asked an insightful question—"whether the museum should be a temple or a forum."[26] According to him, the museum as a temple established artworks as statements and manifestations of universal truths, meaning only allowing visitors to appreciate the artworks instead of questioning their values.[27] By contrast, the museum as a forum presents an always ongoing re-consideration of the value of artworks, that is developed through the critical and thoughtful engagement of voices from different backgrounds and diverse cultures.[28] Those voices include but are not limited to queer theory, feminism, critical race studies, and oral historical interpretations. While Cameron articulates the dilemma and the elitist nature of museums in the past, he does not make it clear how a forum-like museum could work in reality. Inspired by Cameron's discussion and his insightful question, I propose a format of a forum-like exhibition—the "forum exhibition"—for the Parthenon Marbles as a case study. This forum exhibition has the potential not only to reconstitute the museum as a forum but also to stimulate a critical and open discussion about the Parthenon Marbles facilitated by curatorial practices. The "forum exhibition" could take place at any museum or university that owns the Parthenon Marbles, and its goal is to reshape the way in which the public interacts with the Marbles and issues around the Parthenon and its preservation, more broadly.

Instead of having a single curator or a small group of scholars developing the exhibition, the "forum exhibition" would rather be organized by a committee composed of specialists in various fields and from different national and institutional contexts, including scholars focused on decolonization, critical race studies, gender studies, or queer studies, as well as experts in cultural restitution from UNESCO, etc. This committee will work with the Parthenon Marbles to decide how to present them, while all label and exhibition texts will also be reviewed by the members. Notably, the label and all accompanying publications will include notification of authorship— "this perspective is provided by," followed by the names and signatures of the main author and reviewers. On the dedicated website, the committee will also select, by themselves or in collaboration with other scholars, a few insightful or intriguing comments from the public that will be then placed on the museums' walls next to the exhibition labels. The people who write the comments and the recommenders will also leave their signatures at the end of the comments. In such an exhibition, having a committee would allow for the inclusion of the hitherto neglected facts and provide a more inclusive interpretation. At the same time, spectators will examine these arguments and provide their own reflections, both on the website and within the exhibition.

This "forum exhibition" will shape the engagement between the public and the Parthenon Marbles in various ways. Firstly, the inclusion of diverse scholastic and non-scholastic interpretations will allow the discussion to go beyond Anglocentric discourse. By reading the scholarly analysis and providing comments on the exhibition labels online, the viewers will enter into a conversation with the curators. The combination of scholarly and non-scholarly interpretations within the exhibition space will also help to reexamine the history of the Marbles and generate a broader discussion. It is worth noting that non-scholarly interpretations are critical to the format because viewers have better abilities in relating scholastic analysis to their diverse backgrounds and daily experiences, thus explaining and complicating how high art could have values in the modern world. It would help these objects of "high art" to find their place in the contemporary world, enlivening the discussion around the Marbles. Secondly, this approach to exhibiting will highlight the subjectivity of the British Museum, and any museum for that matter, and facilitate a more inclusive and critical representation of the Parthenon Marbles. For visitors who often don't have extensive art historical knowledge, the British Museum may appear to be the place of objective truth and thus of the official and definitive interpretation of the Parthenon Marbles.

Traditionally, in museums, including the British Museum, the author of the museum label is rarely clearly identified, implying and reinforcing the idea that the museum presents universal facts and definitive interpretations. However, in a "forum exhibition," naming each author not only makes the curators more aware of what they are writing, but also informs the viewers about the museum's subjective nature. Additionally, the multiple perspectives provided by different scholars and by the comments of regular viewers will make the visitor aware that there are no singular interpretations when it comes to art. On the museum label, a small reminder of "this perspective provided by" will accentuate the subjectivities of both the curator and the museum. Thirdly, in a "forum exhibition," viewers can encounter varied voices from not only scholars employing different methodologies but also other viewers, who come from varied socio-economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. These diverse voices will assist viewers in reexamining the Parthenon Marbles' history while also facilitating a critical understanding of the Marbles' values and the challenges they pose. Finally, the "form exhibition" allows the viewers to have a more active engagement with the Parthenon Marbles. In the traditional museum, the museum and the artworks are supposed to be objects of learning and understanding, but in practice, they are reduced to visitors taking photos and making posts on social media. By providing a chance for the public to incorporate their comments within the exhibition, the "forum exhibition" will encourage viewers to think and will help the neglected ideas spread. With these goals in mind, the "forum exhibition" will offer a means for the public to interact with the Parthenon Marbles in a more critical and active way, an approach that will prompt a more comprehensive and critical discussion around the Parthenon Marbles in the future.

Both of my suggestions for approaching the Parthenon Marbles—their restitution and a "forum exhibition"—center on a close reexamination of the sculptures' history in the hands of the British. It is a crucial step in facilitating thoughtful discussions and critical interpretations of the Marbles and shaping their "story" for the future.

Fig.1. Egyptian blue visible on the figures L and M from the East pediment of the Parthenon.[29]

Notes

[1] Peter Aspden,"Sharp end of civilisation," *Financial Times (London, England)*, June 14, 2003, 28. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*. https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1133DD33CB5FE938.

[2] Tiffany Jenkins, *Keeping Their Marbles: How the Treasures of the Past Ended up in Museums - and Why They Should Stay There.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 90-110, accessed May 11, 2021, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[3] "Architecture," The British Museum, November 1st, 2021, https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/architecture.

[4] Athena S. Leoussi, "Myths of Ancestry*," *Nations & Nationalism* 7, no. 4 (October 2001): 474, doi:10.1111/1469-8219.00028.

[5] Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 253, accessed May 11, 2021, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[6] Ibid., 253
[7] Ibid., 253
[8] Fiona Greenland, "The Parthenon Marbles as Icons of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Nations & Nationalism* 19, no. 4 (October 2013): 655, doi:10.1111/nana.12039.
[9] The British museum website quoted in Greenland, "Icons of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain," 655. (original link is invalied)
[10] the Act of the Parlement, quoted in Jenkins, *Keeping Their Marbles*, 110. (the original source is not available and cannot be found)
[11] "Parthenon Sculptures - the Trustees' Statement," The British Museum, accessed May 11, 2021, https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/objects-news/parthenon-sculptures/parthenon-sculptures-trustees.
[12] Kasia Weglowska, "Paint and the Parthenon: Conservation of Ancient Greek Sculpture - British Museum Blog," British Museum Blog - Explore stories from the Museum, November 27, 2020, https://blog.britishmuseum.org/paint-and-the-parthenon-conservation-of-ancient-greek-sculpture/.
[13] Elisabeth Kehoe, "c," *Historical Research* 77, no. 198 (November 2004): 515, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2281.2004.00220.x.
[14] William St Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 124.
[15] Greenland, "Icons of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain," 658.
[16] Ibid., 659
[17] Holger Hoock, *Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War and the Arts in the British World, 1750-1850*. (London: Profile Books, 2010), 21, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04202a&AN=ucb.b17763336&site=eds-live.
[18] Greenland, "Icons of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain," 659.
[19] Ibid., 659.
[20] Hamilakis, *The Nation and Its Ruins*, 253.
[21] Ibid., 250
[22] Greenland, "Icons of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain," 660.
[23] London Monthly Magazine quoted in Greenland, "Icons of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain," 666.
[24] See https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures.
[25] See https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures.
[26] Duncan F. Cameron, "The Museum: A Temple Or the Forum," *Cahiers d'Histoire Mondiale.Journal of World History.Cuadernos De Historia Mundial* 14, no. 1 (1972): 189-202. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/museum-temple-forum/docview/1298903404/se-2?accountid=14496.
[27] Ibid.,195.
[28] Ibid.,198.
[29] Kasia Weglowska, "Paint and the Parthenon: Conservation of Ancient Greek Sculpture - British Museum Blog," British Museum Blog - Explore stories from the Museum, November 27, 2020, https://blog.britishmuseum.org/paint-and-the-parthenon-conservation-of-ancient-greek-sculpture/.

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