



GOOD RIDDANCE

WHO NEEDS THE ELGIN MARBLES?

BY STEPHEN BAYLEY

THE INDEPENDENT 6/6 p1
TUESDAY REVIEW

British Museum

You can forget New York and Paris. You can even forget Bilbao. London is ground zero of world art: whether the astonishing success of Tate Modern (testing conventions of crowd control as well as aesthetics) or the vigorous art markets of Hoxton and Shoreditch, there's an unique energy in the air and on the ground. Britain has never seen anything like it: a culture routinely damned as visually illiterate has acquired a huge appetite for art. Tracey Emin confirms George Walden's judgement of Bloomsbury as "cack-handed provincial pastiche". So what about Bloomsbury's other problem, the British Museum's Elgin Marbles? Let's just dare to say it: shouldn't we be big enough to give them back?

In 1808 the painter and art school reformer Benjamin Robert Haydon saw some statues newly arrived from Greece in Lord Elgin's diplomatic baggage. The sight – not entirely unlike Keats's "unravish'd bride of quietness... [that] foster-child of silence and time" – convinced him that he now possessed the entire secret of artistic beauty. In the days before mass production blew apart the aristocratic assumptions about educated taste, such daunting moral certainties in matters of art were commonplace. There is something about this astonishing collection of statuary that encourages absolutist thinking. In matters of patrimony, taste, museology and international cultural relations, Elgin's Marbles are a test case. Now that few of us speak Greek, our appreciation of classical art might be limited, but if a measure of great art is the ability to stir up the emotions, the Parthenon sculptures qualify with surpassing ease.

The facts are well-known. The Seventh Earl of Elgin (1766-1841) spent the years 1799 to 1803 as envoy to the Sublime Porte of the Ottoman Empire, then headquartered in Athens, which is to say he was what today we would call Ambassador to Turkey. When it came to the maintenance and care of the classical heritage, Elgin's belief that the Turks were only in the most primitive evolutionary stages of curatorial responsibility was well-founded. Not overly appreciative of the achievements of the architect Iktinos or the sculptor Pheidias, the Turks had been pleased to use the Parthenon as a military arsenal. A stray shot fired during the Venetian siege

of 1687 ignited the powder store and made a huge contribution to the picturesque disrepair which to this day characterises the Akropolis. In the next century, the architectural travellers Stuart and Revett described in their *Antiquities of Athens* (which became a source book for neo-classicism) that dervishes were whirling in a disrespectful style over the seat of Pallas Athene and that itinerant lime-burners were wont to chip off what bits of antiquity were not being used as building rubble.

Elgin's education made him sensitive to such philistine abuse and his imperial mission empowered – even required – him to remedy the situation, which he did with a mighty hauteur. Whether out of generosity or opportunism we cannot say, but at his own expense Elgin set about acquiring whatever sculptural rubble was loose on the ground, along with a great deal of sculptural masterpieces that were inconveniently and firmly attached to architecture, including the spell-binding Parthenon Frieze. This was, depending on your view, either a singular gesture of cultural philanthropy, or arrogant, piratical looting.

Crated and boxed, the ship returning the sculptures to England foundered and the marbles had to be rescued a second time, this time from the seabed by divers. Once in London, they went on display in private property (which is where Haydon saw them), only eventually being sold to the British Museum – the Tate Modern of its day – in 1816. The price of £36,000, Elgin maintained, was below cost. It was said that Napoleon offered more. Once on view to the public, the select committee responsible for their purchase was confident that public taste would be improved, and thus help the cause of "advancement of everything valuable in science, literature and philosophy".

The artistic power of the Elgin Marbles is overwhelming: they are the acme of classical art. When Thomas Hardy went to see them, he was moved by the fact that these Pagan sculptures of "time-touched stone" had nonetheless "echoed the voice of Paul": in the first century the apostle himself, "a small gaunt figure with wasted features", had addressed the wise men of Athens from the Areopagus. The reverential hush – you get the same in the Rothko room at the Tate Modern – remains today and is a qualification of great art. But the response to the Marbles has not always been so consistent or appreciative.

Elgin's vision was not universally accepted. The use of public funds to buy the collection was as controversial as the Dome is today. Rival collections of art, including Sir Robert Walpole's, were not saved for the nation, but sold abroad to Catherine the Great of Russia. There was a strong philhellenic bias, but Byron, as a romantic champion of Greek independence, was nonetheless appalled by this state-subsidised looting. The poet said: "I opposed and ever oppose the robbery of ruins from Athens, to instruct the English in sculpture (who are as capable of sculpture as the Egyptians of skating)." Some critics maintained the marbles were Roman copies, others that they were not masterpieces but the work of "journeymen, not deserving the name of artists". Others, insensitive to the poetry of decay, said they were "too much broken to be of any value". William Cobbett asked, "Of what use, in the wide world, is this British Museum, and to who, and to what class of persons, is it useful?"

All the great museums of Europe – the Louvre, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, the Glyptothek in Munich – are full of stuff plundered without introspection from Greece. But only the Elgin Marbles excite such fierce controversy, perhaps because the British Museum projects such a lordly and unreflective swagger: the philosophical assumption being that 19th-century Britain was the height of human practical and intellectual development and that it was London's right and responsibility to take custodial care of world patrimony so as to advance civilisation in general. These were the days when Edinburgh was styled "the Athens of the North". Against this insolent bluster, the German collections appear simply archaeological curiosities and even the proud Louvre looks self-effacing.

Exactly whose moral inheritance is the past? Those who would keep the Elgin Marbles in air-conditioned Bloomsbury rather than restore them to the pollution of the Akropolis have some very strong arguments. The first is Elgin's own, that they are ours by right because we saved them from the depredations of careless Turks, and without intervention they would have been lost forever. So, it's finders keepers – and then finders curators.

The second is that, because of their prominence and influence, the Parthenon sculptures have become at least as much a part of British heritage as Greek. Contemporary Athens, this argument

goes, is not only museologically ill-equipped to deal with such treasures, but more significantly, the artistic narrative that began in Periclean Athens was diverted – at some point in the neo-classical era – to London, which has since become a more legitimate home of classical art than a traffic-clogged and concrete Levantine metropolis with no cultural credentials since about 120BC.

The third argument is the most powerful: that to return the Elgin Marbles to Athens sets a precedent that would destabilise the entire museum world (although there are some of us who think this might be no bad thing). If the crude test of "ownership" is place of production (rather than intellectual propriety or material acquisition of chattels) then the *Mona Lisa* would have to leave the Louvre and go back to Milan; the *Laughing Cavalier* would have the smile wiped off his face and return to provincial Haarlem from cosmopolitan Manchester Square; those Rothkos would have to go back to New York; and Liverpool's sublime *Simone Martini* would be in Tuscany before you could say *rinascimento*.

There's force in all these arguments. The first one is true. The second one is half true and the third, if followed through, would lead to a useless sort of anarchy that would undermine fundamental property rights with more far-reaching consequences than niceties of artistic provenance. But since the Elgin Marbles are so exceptional in every way, might not an exception be made about the principle of repatriation?

Byron was right. The British have no great reputation in sculpture nor, indeed, historically speaking, in any of the visual arts. This makes us uniquely insensitive to other nation's potential claims to ownership of the stuff which animates our great museums and galleries. In any case, by the time the Elgin Marbles were on display, the moment had passed and classicism was all but a spent force.

Cobbett was right too. The class of person to whom the Elgin Marbles are "useful" is tourists who come on buses from Charleroi and Utrecht, or fly in wearing sweat-pants from Oklahoma. Very little of value would be lost if they had to go to the Trocadero instead.

Besides, contemporary Greece – not nowadays, in fact, entirely populated by intoxicated dervishes, gluttonous Ottomans, *diskoi*-lopping pederasts,

or hairy imbeciles – would be extravagant in its praise for such a generous gesture which would redress what sensitive scholars and antiquarians see as an injustice not sanctioned by the mere passage of time.

What to do with the empty rooms in the British Museum? Fill them with the painstakingly accurate reproductions that modern technology allows: the happy ghosts of the displaced originals would still haunt and enliven the cavernous galleries, so that a new Thomas Hardy might still feel in touch with something special. There would be no absurdity here, since the whole history of classical sculpture has depended on a cycle of copying and hand-me-down.

Lord Melbourne said, "God help the government that meddles with art," but – Divine assistance notwithstanding – a truly courageous gesture from this artistically craven Government would be very welcome. Most important would be the gesture of national confidence that repatriation indicated, as swaggering in its way as Elgin's original "acquisition". For the very first time in history, Britain can claim a culture of the visual arts that is internationally pre-eminent. Artists (however one defines them), architects and designers do not look abroad for inspiration, but find it in the extraordinarily vital world city that London has become.

Tracey Emin and Cornelia Parker may perhaps not (yet) know Haydon's "entire secret of artistic beauty", but they possess astonishing talent that operates in the modern world, not in the antiquity of the Horse of Selene and the Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs. Against the magnificent gesture of restoring the Elgin Marbles to a new, genuine and appropriate Parthenon Museum, the interests of shuffling tourists from Utrecht and Oklahoma City count for very little.

In the British Museum, gazing on the most controversial sculptures in the history of art, Thomas Hardy wrote:

*Words that in all their intimate accents
Pattered upon
That marble front, and were wide reflected
And then were gone.*

Elgin found his Marbles, now we should lose them.