TELL THE STORY

Just imagine a world culture museum where the whole story is told.
We urge the British Museum to provide the full story to visitors.

The following sentence appears on the British Museum's website:

The Parthenon sculptures now in the British Museum were stolen. This isn't true. Lord Elgin, the British diplomat who transported the sculptures to England, acted with the full knowledge and permission of the legal authorities of the day in both Athens and London. Lord Elgin's activities were thoroughly investigated by a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1816 and found to be entirely legal. Following a vote of Parliament, the British Museum was allocated funds to acquire the collection.

The boot is on the other foot, dear BM: '*Lord Elgin...acted with the full knowledge and permission of the legal authorities of the day in both Athens and London'* isn't true. It's a statement reminiscent of what one is tempted to call The Lie Institutional.

In actual fact no proof exists from the Sultan - the highest legal authority of the day - of his *full knowledge* nor is *full permission* granted in any archive yet discovered. The history of the '*firmans*' [Ottoman written permissions] is messier than the BM's swingeing assertion.

The simpler truth is that no original documentation granting Elgin legal permission to remove the sculptures has ever been found.

Elgin merely had a questionable Italian document referring vaguely to *'some pieces of stone'* which he claimed was issued from the Ottoman Sultanate but given the form and the language in translation, is dubious to say the least.

When Elgin shipped his '*pieces of stone'* back to Britain he intended them, not for the nation but for his Scottish country seat. When later he became bankrupt and in desperation offered them to The British Museum, they were, strictly speaking, not his to sell.

All this has been thoroughly debated in the past, and a sort of compromise was reached by Parliament passing an Act to allow the BM Trusteeship of the Parthenon Marbles that Elgin took away. In taking them, Elgin caused havoc to the already partly ruined building, awkwardly chopping figures off and causing others to fall and smash.

The Ottoman Sultanate cared not a jot for figurative art and was more amenable to making friends with its enemy's enemy than conserving the treasures of its occupation. Paris and London were at war. Greece was under the Ottoman yoke in Elgin's time and not master of its own.

So, it is emphatically not with the expressed will of the independent Greek people that the Marbles reside in London. For over two hundred years they have wanted them returned.

Factoids

Chiming with the times we live in, you might call this self-serving statement by the BM a factoid. A factoid is a false fact repeated often enough to take on a truth of its own. It is not altogether worthy of such an august institution to bandy half-truths.

But it could redeem itself: in 2021 Greece celebrated its two hundredth year of independence from Ottoman rule, and with a stunning museum expressly built twelve years ago to house its incomparable Marbles, Britain could make a longed-for redemptive gesture.

The New Acropolis Museum has every modern research facility that can be wished for so worldwide accessibility is not an argument, nor are the old excuses about superior conservation.

The Parthenon Marbles have profoundly influenced political movements, classical studies, passionate philhellenism and deeply affected the humanism and aesthetic tastes of the Enlightenment. Their work is done, they changed the West.

Closeted In their grey rooms in Bloomsbury, what seems to be forgotten by their curators is that these ravishing sculptures are outside artefacts. They belong under Attic sunshine and cloud to a building still standing on its rock yet robbed of its stories. In this they are unique; no other object in the BM boasts a source like this.

They turn they twist they run they flow; they were carved as an integral part of possibly the most perfect building ever built, telling in stone the mysteries of the pan-Athenaic procession surging in eternal, restless movement around Athena's temple.

They can't go back to the building but they can be seen in plain sight of it - an emotional connection which would bridge the gap that yawns in Bloomsbury. In the BM they seem static, detached, desolately out of context. Classical Athens is far more mysterious and complex than Room 18 in its starkness will allow.

All museums must surely be responsive to current events? Attitudes have markedly shifted against colonial kleptocracies. Society is asking questions about provenance and history, about a sense of place and about national meanings.

The Marbles embody an entire cultural memory for the Greek people. Some art expresses the very soul of a nation, and the Parthenon itself, besides having evolved as the universal symbol for democratic thought, is just that. It stands high above the city of Athens to this day, impossible to remove from daily Greek consciousness.
What an exciting perk for the visitor to make that visual connection from the ultra modern museum adjacent to it, looking out through plate-glass windows in plain sight of it.

Melina Mercouri, when she was Culture Minister in the 1960's made charismatic pleas in person for their return, but still the British Museum retains an obdurate silence on the subject. That silence smacks of colonial entitlement. Greece's Culture minister in 2019 made yet another plea for their return, and Jeremy Wright, UK's Culture Secretary at that time replied:

"As is very well known, the Parthenon sculptures are owned by…the Trustees of the British museum, which is independent of the government, for the last two hundred years".

Here is the factoid at its work again. No sir, the Trustees of the BM do not 'own' the sculptures, they hold them in Trust. Nor are the Trustees independent of the government as the government still approves their appointments.

In its heyday Great Britain took what it wanted because it could, but the empire is no more. It's over. Every object in the museum removed from its source is necessarily placed in a space without context. The BM with its unmatched global collections owes everything to colonial acquisitions taken from conquered countries.

Heritage, culture and nature are necessary for enhanced understanding. The Marbles are inalienable treasures belonging to the Greek people and constitute Greek nationhood. Clinging to the narratives of an imperial past impoverishes the objects, and smacks of Western centrism; human rights thinking needs to inform the argument.

The BM does not inform visitors that the figures in Room 18 have their other half in Athens. It's ridiculous that they are still divided. Many of the stolen metopes are similarly traduced, half a horse here, half a warrior there.

Dr Fischer, Director of the BM wants us to see this brutal separation of a whole concept as a '*creative act*'. He cites the breakup of Duccio's altar-piece, the Maesta in Siena's cathedral, as one such '*act*', quelling the thought of how much that masterpiece would regain in power were it back together as Duccio conceived it.

Duccio and Pheidias should surely win over self-justification? Having housed a fine exhibition showing how the Marbles inspired Rodin, Dr. Fischer's statement about 'creative acts' seems, to say the least, disingenuous. Who would dare remove just one of the haunting figures from Rodin's powerful group *The Burghers of Calais* and stick it in some distant land?

The BM boasts 6 million visitors, but publishes no figures for the numbers who actually land up in Room 18. Day trippers hardly have time to take in the full extent of what's on show, so vast and comprehensive is the BM collection.

Whatever lesser numbers The Acropolis Museum tots up are irrelevant to the experience. It's not the numbers, obviously, it's the quality of the experience. Here's the thing: visitors there view their half of the pedimental Marbles in visual juxtaposition to the building they once adorned; they ascend the floors of the building one by one, as if they were climbing the Sacred Rock itself, upwards to the top galleries built on a level with the Parthenon. Ancient Athens in all its mystery can seem for a moment alive. At last the Greek people could see for themselves what they gave to the world. The integrity of Pheidias' vision would be restored if all the objects were as physically complete as possible.

There is actually nothing to stop the British from making a generous gesture - bar overturning an Act of Parliament. And there is nothing to stop that happening, except will.

Basically what remains is a matter of simple justice; the Marbles must return to Athens where they belong. Perfect casts can replace the originals. History has done its stuff; the future beckons.

For further information, visit the British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles @ www.parthenonuk.com

The bookshop in the BM does not stock these books:

The Parthenon Marbles: The case for the Reunification
Christopher Hitchens (Verso 3rd edition with a preface by Nadine Gordimer, May 2008, e-book June 2016)

The Universal Museum: A valid model for the 21st century?
Tom Flynn, Lulu 2012

The Return of Cultural Treasures
Dr Jeanette Greenfield, Cambridge 2007 (3rd Edition)

Thinking about the Elgin Marbles
John Merryman 2000

Lord Elgin and the Marbles
William St. Clair, 3rd edition Oxford University Press 1998