Museums, World Heritage, and Interpretation — the Case of the Parthenon Marbles

Moira Simpson

The status of the Parthenon Marbles as objects of world heritage lies at the heart of arguments for their retention in the British Museum as part of one of the most significant universal museum collections in the world. This paper challenges the logic of this argument. After a brief description of the circumstances that enabled western museums to acquire their collections and led to the development of the “universal museum”, I will outline the efforts that have been made at national and international levels to protect cultural property, efforts which have curtailed the ability of museums to accumulate materials on the scale of previous periods in their history. I then discuss the reasons why, despite this, international cultural property protection measures do not resolve many of the debates surrounding ownership and repatriation of items in existing museum collections. I will then use the case of the Greek claim for the return to Athens of the Elgin collection of Parthenon Marbles, currently held in the British Museum, to examine the issues relating to the nature of universal museums and international responsibilities for the preservation and effective interpretation of items of world heritage value.
Introduction

In recent years, debates concerning the ownership of objects in the collections of western museums have drawn attention to the varied circumstances under which museums acquired their collections. They have highlighted differing perspectives regarding appropriate methods of preserving and interpreting cultural materials and raised questions concerning the prioritisation of local, national and international heritage preservation strategies. Much of the discussion surrounding claims to specific objects has considered the circumstances of acquisition, questions of legal ownership, the historical and cultural significance of the objects, and the responsibilities of the collecting institution to donors, researchers, the visiting public and future generations; responsibility to the descendants of the original owners was, until recently, rarely mentioned. Of course, the meanings attributed to objects vary according to the values and beliefs of the individual and reflect their cultural, historical and political perspectives. Museum curators, art historians, academic researchers and museum visitors may well perceive quite different values from original owners and their descendants. Moreover, some objects are perceived by art historians and heritage professionals to be of such aesthetic, cultural and historical importance that they are of world heritage value. In the view of some, this status places them above community or national claims to ownership and necessitates their retention in one of the world’s leading museums. The Parthenon Marbles hold such value and their status as objects of world heritage lies at the heart of arguments for their retention in the British Museum as part of one of the most significant universal museum collections in the world. In this paper I will challenge the logic of this argument. The major focus of my argument will be a discussion of the implications that world heritage status has for resolving the question of whether or not the Parthenon Marbles should be returned to Athens from the British Museum, where they have been held since the early nineteenth century.
Universal museums

The circumstances which led to the acquisition of museum collections arise from events and processes embedded in the history of museums and of western scientific and academic enquiry. Many of the major European museums are built upon collections first established during the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period international exploration and trade, colonial activities, and scientific expeditions and research interests facilitated the acquisition of rich natural and cultural resources. Antiquities and ethnographic materials were collected from all parts of the world through trade and purchase or through archaeological excavation. However, the historical records of collectors and museums also provide accounts of the removal of objects and architectural features from ancient or abandoned sites and monuments, and even the surreptitious removal of items from burial sites, shrines and other culturally sensitive locations. While some of these methods are deemed inappropriate today, at the time they may have been quite acceptable. Looting and plundering by armies, for example, were accepted practices in past centuries; and in European colonies government officials, missionaries, and others in positions of authority are known to have confiscated items deemed inappropriate to the “civilising” mission of the colonial powers.

While small regional museums tend to focus primarily upon local natural and cultural history or upon items acquired elsewhere through the activities of local peoples, major state and university museums in western nations have built collections of materials from many cultures and from the ancient to the modern world. The collections of these major collecting institutions are typically encyclopaedic in nature and universal in scope, providing a valuable record of human activity and creativity. The breadth of the collections of antiquities and ethnographic materials held by these universal museums enables objects to be seen within a broad historical and cultural framework and so they can be the subject of both detailed study and comparative analysis. Naturally, it is the major universal museums which are...
most likely to receive requests for repatriation, as they hold the most
diverse collections and often the most significant items; yet despite the
enormous numbers of objects from many parts of the world, inter-
national repatriation claims are still relatively few in number. Much
of the discourse concerning repatriation relates to domestic cultural
property issues being negotiated by Indigenous peoples and govern-
ments and/or museums in their own countries, particularly the USA,
Canada and Australia.

At an international level, the debate over Greek demands for the
return of the Parthenon Marbles to Athens has attracted a great deal
of public and media attention over the past thirty or so years and often
dominates public discourse on the subject of repatriation. However, it
is just one of a number of requests for repatriation which have been
made in recent times, for repatriation is a global issue reflecting the
complex and intertwined histories of nations and items of cultural
property. International requests for the repatriation of items from
museum collections have been made by individuals, organisations
or communities concerning items originating in Europe, America,
Australia, Africa and Asia. These requests relate to objects acquired
through a variety of means including artworks and antiquities plun-
dered by armies during times of war; cultural materials and human
remains acquired during the colonial era; antiquities and human
remains professionally excavated from archaeological sites prior to
countries introducing legislation preventing the export of important
items of cultural heritage; and the persisting problem of art and antiq-
uites illegally removed from archaeological sites, monuments, and
collections, and illicitly exported across international borders.

International efforts to protect cultural property

It was the results of the occupation of Greece by the Turks that ena-
bled Lord Elgin and his party to remove carvings from the Parthenon
in Athens and other sites, between 1801 and 1804. As Greece was then
part of the Ottoman Empire, it was from the Turks, not the Greeks,
that Elgin — then the British Ambassador to Turkey — sought permission to undertake his studies of the monument and the removal of certain pieces of stone. Permission was negotiated and granted in a series of letters or firmans from the Ottoman government over a period of years. Elgin later claimed he was given permission to remove quantities of the architectural features and sculptures, but unfortunately none of the original documents have been located. The only surviving documentation is an Italian translation of the second firman sent in July 1801, which was recently published in a book by William St Clair. Even this does not provide a clear indication of exactly what Elgin was permitted to do beyond carrying out studies, making drawings and possibly removing some pieces of stone of which much was scattered on the ground. The words in the firman refer to Elgin “undertaking to dig according to need the foundations to find inscribed blocks among the rubbish” (St Clair, 1998:340). However, Elgin went much further, removing great portions of the pediment of the Parthenon, which he shipped back to Britain.

Even at the time of the acquisition of the Marbles by Lord Elgin and their subsequent purchase by the British Government in 1816, there was opposition to their removal from the Parthenon.

The poet Byron, for example, repeatedly attacked the plundering of Greek antiquities by British hands in direct contradiction to the responsibilities which he felt they had to protect them. Here, for example, is an excerpt from his poem “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage”:

Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on thee,
Nor feels as lovers o’er the dust they loved;
Dull is the eye that will not weep to see
Thy walls defaced, thy mouldering shrines removed
By British hands, which it best behoved
To guard those relics ne’er to be restored.
Curst be the hour when from their isle they roved,
And once again thy hapless bosom gored,
And snatch’d thy shrinking Gods to Northern climes abhorr’d!


Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
While plundering by armies had been an accepted practice for centuries, Byron's words reflect a growing acknowledgement of the need to respect the cultural and religious beliefs of others which led over time to international efforts to protect national cultural property. Consideration of the need to respect the religious and cultural property of others has been recorded over many centuries and the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 included provision for the restitution of cultural property.\footnote{For a discussion of these developments see Nahlik, 1988 and Boylan, 2002.} After Napoleon's defeat, many art works and treasures were returned to the countries from which they were removed, although many others had become dispersed. This was the first large-scale restitution of cultural property plundered during warfare. It became generally accepted that it was improper for armies and states to acquire the possessions of the private homes, places of worship and public institutions of their opponents. Future efforts to lay down rules for the legal protection of cultural property during periods of armed conflict included the Brussels Declaration of 1874, the Hague Laws of War of 1899, the 1907 Hague Convention Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land, and the Treaty of London in 1943. Despite these efforts, the largest ever programme of systematic looting occurred between 1933 and 1945 when the Nazis persecuted the Jews and then occupied countries across Europe, confiscating hundreds of thousands of art works and antiques from private and public collections. At the end of the war, the Allies made efforts to return much of the material although large amounts had become dispersed and have since become the subject of claims by descendants. Following the Second World War, efforts to protect cultural property during times of war were formalised in the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (the Hague Convention). This specified that military and occupying forces may only take as booty objects which were military in function such as weapons, uniforms, military vehicles, etc. A Second Protocol to the Hague Convention, adopted in March 1999, requires occupying powers to prohibit and prevent the
illicit export, removal or change of ownership of cultural property.

Legislative measures have also been taken in many countries to protect cultural heritage such as antiquities and art works, and prevent their export. Prior to the introduction of such legislation, many nations permitted overseas institutions to excavate archaeological sites. Through a system of partage, archaeological teams were able to export their portion of the collections to the museums, universities or private collectors who had funded the excavations. Heritage protection legislation has largely halted the previously legitimate processes that enabled western universal museums to export antiquities and accumulate vast collections of material from many countries and cultures, some of which are now the subject of repatriation claims.

These legislative developments have, however, been of only limited success in halting looting and illicit export activities; illegal looting from archaeological sites and monuments and the export of antiquities have continued to supply the art and antiquities market. Internationally, efforts have been made to halt the illicit trade of art and antiquities now estimated to be worth $6.5 billion per year — more than the drugs and arms trades. The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property is intended to protect cultural objects by controlling their trade. It also provides a means by which governments can co-operate to recover cultural objects which have been stolen and moved illegally across national frontiers. The Convention does not apply to items stolen or illicitly exported prior to 1970, only to illicit activities which occur after a state has acceded to the Convention. EU countries have also introduced an agreement — the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen and Illegally Exported Cultural Objects — which provides a private individual or institution with the right and the means to reclaim stolen objects in the courts of the country in which the object is located. Like the UNESCO Convention, it is not applicable to items collected prior to ratification.

These conventions are not, therefore, applicable to many of the antiquities and ethnographic objects in western museums which...
were primarily collected in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This includes items such as the Parthenon Marbles, the Benin bronzes, Aboriginal Australian sacred objects, Canadian First Nations’ ceremonial objects, royal regalia from Ghana, religious objects from Ethiopia, and antiquities from Ancient Egypt, which have been the subject of international claims for repatriation in recent years.

In circumstances where no conventions, laws or formal inter-governmental agreements apply, consideration of repatriation requests has often relied upon questions of legal ownership as defined by international law. Regardless of the methods of acquisition or any infringement of the customary laws of the traditional owners such items are invariably regarded as legally owned by the collecting institutions. In these circumstances, claimants for the repatriation of objects from museums have little or no recourse to law. In Britain, the settlement of claims — should they be given due consideration — is largely undertaken on a case-by-case basis determined by cultural, historical, spiritual and moral factors. In the past, this has often resulted in a tendency to over-simplification of the issue, reducing it to a question of “return or retain” — a confrontational and inflexible stance which achieves little.2

What about the Parthenon Marbles?

Greek requests for the return of the Marbles began in 1829 shortly after they gained independence from the Ottomans. Efforts have continued, gaining ground in recent times, due to the efforts of Greek individuals, Greek authorities and supporters worldwide who continue to lobby for the return of the Marbles to Athens. With no recourse to international laws or agreements which would facilitate the transfer of

2 There have been instances in which museum staff have agreed to international repatriation requests or even instigated repatriation negotiations after recognising the questionable circumstances surrounding acquisition and/or the significance of the objects to traditional owners. See, for example, cases which I have described in Simpson, 1997 and Simpson, 2001 (1996).
ownership back to the Greeks, the Greek Government has attempted to negotiate with the British Government and the British Museum to bring about the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Athens. Successive directors of the British Museum, however, have categorically ruled out relinquishing ownership of the Marbles on the grounds that the British Museum Act prohibits them from doing so. As a result, efforts have been made to find alternative solutions.

The Greek government has dropped its claim to ownership and has sought resolution based upon transfer of the Marbles to Athens on long-term loan. They propose to place the Marbles in the new Acropolis Museum in Athens where they will be protected from environmental pollution and will be properly conserved and displayed. They have also suggested possible models for sharing the future management, care and interpretation of the Marbles with the British Museum, by an arrangement which would see the British Museum having a formal presence in Athens.

However, the Parthenon Marbles are seen as a vital component of the British Museum’s collections. At a meeting between the BM director Neil MacGregor, Sir John Boyd, Chairman of the BM Trustees, and Evangelos Venizelos, Greek Minister for Culture, in November 2002, Neil MacGregor told Venizelos that “the Parthenon sculptures are among a select group of key objects which are indispensable to the Museum’s core function, which is to tell the story of human cultural evolution and civilization; and that, as such, the sculptures cannot be lent to any museum, in Greece or elsewhere” (British Museum, 2002b). In a later interview, MacGregor argued that the Marbles could “do most good” in their current location in the British Museum where they can be viewed in the context of the achievements of the wider ancient world.

In the case of the Parthenon Marbles, care has also been an issue. The historian Ellis Tinios has claimed that the Parthenon sculptures were saved from a worse fate by Lord Elgin when he removed them in 1801 and that those parts of the frieze that remained in Athens were in a far worse state now than those in London. Tinios (2002) argues that


Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
Destruction would have continued unabated for several more decades and far less sculpture would survive in readable form today if Elgin had not acted. His cure may have been drastic, but it worked. Those pieces Elgin removed from the Parthenon were not only spared piecemeal damage and destruction in the last decades of Ottoman administration of Athens, but also the risks occasioned by the two sieges of the Acropolis that occurred in 1822 and 1827 during the Greek war of independence.

The Turks’ treatment of the Parthenon caused a good deal of damage — the Parthenon was used for target practice and as a munitions store — and in the twentieth century, further damage has been caused by high levels of pollution which is an ongoing problem in Athens.

More broadly, it is certainly the case that a huge amount of cultural material would have been lost had it not been collected and then preserved in museums, particularly during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when many cultures in the colonised nations seemed to be on the verge of extinction, after suffering the damaging effects of western intrusion and settlement including warfare, infectious diseases, government policies of acculturation, Christianisation, and loss of traditional lands and cultural practices.

In addition to seeking to acquire fine examples of classical art, Lord Elgin may well have also believed that the removal of the Marbles rescued them from further damage, and it can be argued that his actions had this outcome at a time when the Parthenon was being neglected and even deliberately damaged by the actions of the Turks. However, we need to ask ourselves whether that is a reason to continue to withhold from a nation objects which are probably the most significant examples of that nation’s architectural, artistic and cultural heritage, when that nation is now fully capable of preserving them in a new museum which offers tremendous interpretative potential. The extent, speed and cost of international communications and travel today, provide us with access to museum collections wherever they are in the world. If objects are housed in a museum which meets professional museological standards, then their preservation and conservation would be ensured, thus fulfilling one of the primary functions of the western museum.
The universal museum and objects of world heritage

Like many of the world’s major museums, the British Museum holds extensive collections which are universal in scope, reflecting the political, scholarly and commercial interests and activities of Britain and other western nations during the period of the birth of the public museum. Worldwide collecting practices during that era cannot be matched in scope and scale by collecting policies of contemporary museums which are limited by modern political, ethical and financial constraints. This gives universal museums and their collections particular importance as places which display the greatest works of art from many periods and cultures, and so facilitate comparative research into technological, stylistic and aesthetic expressions across temporal and cultural boundaries.

The importance of the collections of universal museums and the concept of objects holding world heritage value have repeatedly been used to argue against the repatriation of artefacts. In December 2002, the directors of 19 major museums in Europe and North America signed a “Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums” (British Museum, 2002a). The Declaration emphasises the importance of universal museums in interpreting objects and providing access to visitors from around the world. “The universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures,

---

3 In December 2002, the directors of 19 major museums signed a “Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums”. These included, amongst others, the directors of: The Art Institute of Chicago; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Louvre Museum, Paris; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Prado Museum, Madrid; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; and the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

The International Council of Museums has responded to the Declaration by saying that “repatriation of objects is an issue that should be very carefully dealt with. Unnecessarily strong judgements or declarations should in any case be avoided” and museums faced with repatriation claims “should be prepared to initiate dialogues with an open-minded attitude based on scientific and professional principles”, and recommended establishing bi- or multilateral relationships with museums initiating requests. Representatives of Museums Australia and the Museums Association in the UK have also criticised the stance of the Declaration.
widely available to an international public in major museums”. They argue against the restitution of cultural objects acquired by museums in the past, stating that “museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation. Each object contributes to that process. To narrow the focus of museums whose collections are diverse and multifaceted would therefore be a disservice to all visitors”.

The exchanges and transformations of objects in museums reflect the intertwined histories of nations arising from human exploration, migration, colonialism, and other aspects of intercultural interaction. Through their transfer and acquisition, museum objects have complex histories and multiple meanings. But the signatories of the Declaration also dismiss questions concerning the mode of acquisition and use the complex histories of the objects to argue against repatriation on the grounds that the objects have become part of the cultural heritage of the acquiring nations:

The objects and monumental works that were installed decades and even centuries ago in museums throughout Europe and America were acquired under conditions that are not comparable with current ones. Over time, objects so acquired — whether by purchase, gift, or partage — have become part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them.

Furthermore, these universal museums hold many objects which are of such artistic and cultural significance that they are regarded as being of world heritage value. Using the example of Greek sculpture, the Declaration stated that:

its accession into the collections of public museums throughout the world marked the significance of Greek sculpture for mankind as a whole. Moreover, the distinctly Greek aesthetic of these works appears all the more strongly as the result of their being seen and studied in direct proximity to products of other great civilizations.

Here, the notion of objects as “world heritage” overrides their national importance or their significance to traditional owners and the definition


Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
of “world heritage” is used to justify retention, even though repatriation might be on the basis of return to another museum.

World heritage and collective responsibility

While the notion of world heritage status has been used by opponents of repatriation to argue for the retention of the Marbles in the British Museum, it has also provided an even more powerful argument for their return to Athens. As Evangelos Venizelos, the Greek Minister of Culture, has stated:

The request for the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles is not made by the Greek government in the name of the Greek nation or of Greek history. It is made in the name of the cultural heritage of the world and with the voice of the mutilated monument itself that cries out for its marbles to be returned (Comerford, 1998).

The Acropolis was inscribed on the World Heritage list in 1987, described as “Illustrating the civilizations, myths and religions that flourished in Greece over a period of more than 1,000 years, the Acropolis, the site of four of the greatest masterpieces of classical Greek art — the Parthenon, the Propylaea, the Erechtheum and the Temple of Athena Nike — can be seen as symbolizing the idea of world heritage” (UNESCO, 1988).

The UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (the World Heritage Convention) is one of the most universal international legal instruments for the protection of the cultural and natural heritage. It was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1972 and entered into force on 17 December 1975. By March 2003, one hundred and seventy-six countries had signed the Convention. According to the World Heritage Convention, “cultural heritage” is defined as a monument, group of

---

buildings or site of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, scientific, archaeological, ethnological or anthropological point of view.\footnote{UNESCO, 1988: I. Definition Of The Cultural And Natural Heritage, Article 1.} The Convention was adopted by UNESCO in recognition that “cultural heritage and the natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions […] and] that deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world.” The Convention was designed to identify and protect sites and monuments defined as being “of outstanding universal value”; the introduction to the Convention notes that “parts of the cultural or natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole”. Recognising “the magnitude and gravity of the new dangers threatening them” the Convention sought to establish “an effective system of collective protection of the cultural and natural heritage” and states that “it is incumbent on the international community as a whole to participate in the protection of the cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value, by the granting of collective assistance” (UNESCO, 1988).

When notions of world heritage and national heritage clash, what defining criteria should be used to seek a resolution? What are the responsibilities of the international community towards items of world heritage in terms of preservation and interpretation, and what form should the “collective protection” and “collective assistance” take? This is relatively clear, in principle at least, when considering objects or sites which remain in situ and are at risk from environmental hazards such as flood or erosion, or from the effects of human actions such as over-visitation, neglect, looting, or warfare. But the question is far less clear when applied to a site now recognised as a world heritage site, and objects which previously have been removed from that site and which are already being preserved in the security of a museum.
The notion of heritage value is then being applied separately both to the site and to component parts of that site. Given that security and preservation are no longer issues of concern, the matter must be considered in terms of cultural and historical significance. Previously the sculptures were parts of a monument which, under the practices and international conventions of today, would be classified as “immovable cultural heritage”. As such, every effort would be made to maintain the integrity of the original site and protect it from the removal of any parts. Should priority now be given to the retention of the Parthenon Marbles in the universal museum where they can be seen in comparative context along with historical and cultural masterpieces of art and architecture from other times and places? Or should the collective responsibilities of the international community focus upon facilitating their return to Athens where their display in proximity to the Acropolis will contribute to the preservation and interpretation of a site of “outstanding universal value” comprising “four of the greatest masterpieces of classical Greek art”, while also facilitating better understanding of the original context and aesthetic impact of the Marbles themselves when they were in place as pediments on the Parthenon? The main consideration then would be the best strategy for interpreting items which are perceived to be of such artistic and cultural value that they are regarded as items of world heritage and yet have been removed from the architectural structure of a world heritage site.

Current display of the Marbles

The Parthenon Marbles are currently displayed in the Duveen Gallery in the British Museum. The gallery is a large, austere space which lacks any structural or aesthetic resemblance to the Parthenon and fails to convey any of the beauty, grandeur or scale of the original context of the sculptures’ display as part of the Parthenon. In 1998, two new explanatory galleries were opened adjoining the Duveen Gallery. These include a multimedia reconstruction and a touch tour for visually impaired visitors, to which audio guides are available in
seven languages. The British Museum is also expanding its accessibility through electronic means offering information, virtual exhibitions and virtual tours with images of several thousand objects.

In discussing the options for the future location of the Marbles, consideration must also be given to the effect upon the British Museum and the visiting public of the transfer of the Marbles to Athens. Given the size and scope of the British Museum's collections, it is likely that the return of the Marbles to Athens would in no way detract from the value or attraction of the British Museum but would do a great deal to enhance its reputation which has been much damaged by this issue. The British Museum authorities argue that the Parthenon Marbles are a core element of the Museum's classical collections and claim that it can interpret the Marbles to the largest number of people; reportedly five million visitors see the Parthenon Marbles annually. Yet, only fifteen per cent of the British adult population recall having seen the Marbles in the British Museum. In a Mori poll commissioned by the British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles in October 2002, 56 per cent of those polled favoured the Marbles returning to Greece under certain conditions already agreed to by the Greeks, while only 7 per cent opposed their return.

A loan or partnership agreement between the British and Greek governments, or the trustees of the British Museum and those of the new Acropolis Museum, would avoid the issue of setting a precedent since loan agreements are common practice already. However, the British Museum director Neil MacGregor has said that the Marbles will never be returned to Athens, even on loan, and has suggested an alternative. He has proposed that the Greek Government accept instead a computer-generated virtual reconstruction showing what the 2,500-year-old Marbles would look like on the Parthenon. The reconstruction would involve taking several thousand photographs of the Parthenon, as well as those objects which have been removed from the site and placed in museums around the world. Neil MacGregor is reported to have said that "The Parthenon can never be reconstructed, so let’s try and put together what’s left of it virtually.” In response, Professor Anthony
Snodgrass, the chairman of the British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles, commented that: “I would only be happy with a virtual reality version if it were put in the British Museum as a replacement for the originals” (Hastings, 2003).

**The alternative: contextualisation in time and place.**

Greece’s alleged inability to properly conserve the Marbles in heavily polluted Athens has been one of the main arguments used by opponents of returning those that have previously been removed. The presence of the Parthenon Marbles in a well-managed museum in any part of the world would serve the purposes of preservation and conservation. However, the Greek government has commissioned the construction of a new Acropolis Museum designed by Swiss-American architect Bernard Tschumi, which will house the 2,300-year-old artefacts and which is now under construction. Accepting that atmospheric pollution prohibits their return to an open site, the return of the Marbles to a museum near the Acropolis offers opportunities for display and interpretation which would be far more evocative and effective than their current location in the stark Duveen Gallery of the British Museum. This would address the issue of preservation and enable the Marbles to be re-interpreted in proximity to the Parthenon itself. So let’s consider the plans for the new Acropolis Museum and the issue of where the Marbles — as items of world heritage — would best be served and where they would most effectively communicate to visitors.

The new Museum is being constructed at the southern base of the Acropolis at the location of the ancient road which led up to the Acropolis in classical times. A walkway of about 1.5 miles or 2.4 km will link the Acropolis and a series of archaeological sites leading to the new Acropolis Museum. The vision for the new Acropolis Museum is that it will bring together all the sculptures that have been removed from the Acropolis and provide space for the unification of the frieze, metopes and pediments of the Parthenon. The Parthenon Gallery will be located on the upper floor and the plans provide for
the inclusion of the Elgin collection of the Parthenon Marbles, those currently in the British Museum. The Greek authorities intend that the Museum’s Parthenon Gallery will remain largely empty until the Parthenon Marbles held in the British Museum are returned to Athens. This, they believe, will make a potent political statement and highlight the ongoing campaign to see the Parthenon Marbles returned to Athens.

The gallery will have glass walls which would enable visitors to view the Marbles and also look out directly at the Acropolis and the Parthenon itself and so observe the architecture and surviving sculptures of the Parthenon together and better appreciate their original configuration and context. From the interpretative point of view this location would facilitate greater appreciation of the original context in which the Marbles were intended to be seen and enable visitors to envision them as one element of a complex of structures. Conversely, visitors to the Acropolis would be better able to appreciate the former glory of the Parthenon itself, if the absent Marbles could be viewed nearby and this in turn would enhance the interpretative potential of the Parthenon structure and the site of the Acropolis as a whole.

**Conclusion**

The role of museums as institutions which display the scientific, cultural and artistic heritage of the world’s peoples is one of immense value to society. Through their collections museums can preserve evidence of the achievements and changes in human activities and development, provide visitors with insights to alternative world views, beliefs and values, and help to engender greater understanding of the cultural beliefs of others. From the museological perspective, resolutions to the repatriation issue are rarely easy; each case must be judged on its own merits. The case of the Parthenon Marbles is just one instance of many which highlight the complex histories and political debates over cultural property.
In terms of cultural significance and its interpretative potential, the return of the Marbles and their presence in the new Acropolis Museum in Athens would be invaluable in increasing the effectiveness of their display and interpretation. One of the main reasons cited for retaining them in the British Museum is the capacity for the Museum, with its broad historical and cultural collections, to display the Parthenon Marbles within a broader context of other cultures and time periods enabling comparative analysis and appreciation of their excellence as outstanding art works. However, their display in the barren isolation of the Duveen Gallery does them no justice. It is extremely difficult to visualise their true beauty when they are isolated from the architecture upon which they were once mounted. The display cannot possibly convey the magnitude of the Parthenon as an architectural and aesthetic masterpiece and the impact that the sculptures would have had as part of the structure as a whole. It is significant that in the Mori poll referred to earlier, public support for the return of the Marbles was highest amongst people who had seen the Marbles in the Duveen Gallery.

The Declaration on the importance and value of universal museums states that “Museums are agents in the development of culture, whose mission is to foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation”. In the context of the new Acropolis Museum in Athens the full story of the Marbles — including their removal and subsequent preservation and display in the British Museum — can be told in relation to the structure and site for which they were created, and within the context of the original and subsequent architectural development of the city of Athens. The relinquishment of the Marbles by the British Museum would therefore be a significant contribution towards the reinterpretation of the Marbles, the Parthenon and the Acropolis.

However, I believe that the collective responsibility of the international community towards the Acropolis as a World Heritage site has been largely omitted from much of the discussion about the future location of the Parthenon Marbles. I would argue that the fulfilment of the obligations that the World Heritage Convention places upon the
international community with regard to their “collective responsibility” for the Acropolis can only be achieved if nationalistic interests are put aside and attention is turned away from the Marbles as an isolated group of art works. Instead, efforts should be focused upon improving the integrity of the Acropolis as a whole (with due regard to conservation and within the limitations of the current physical state of the various components). Given that the return of the Parthenon Marbles to the new Acropolis Museum in Athens would greatly enhance the historical, cultural and aesthetic integrity of the Acropolis as a World Heritage site, this would surely do more to uphold the principles and objectives of the World Heritage Convention and the functions of museums as instruments for preserving and interpreting heritage than would their retention by the British Museum.

Bibliography

Boylan, 2002

British Museum, 2002a


Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
British Museum, 2002b

CAMA, 1993

Comerford, 1998

Hastings, 2003

Museums Australia, 2003

Nahlik, 1988


Simpson, 1997

St Clair, 1998

Tinios, 2002
Ellis Tinios, “The Fate of the Parthenon sculptures in Athens”. In ArtWatch, Summer.

UNESCO, 1988

UNESCO, 1987