

THE NEW ACROPOLIS MUSEUM AND THE PARTHENON SCULPTURES:

Beware Greeks with new museums

The week long celebrations culminating with the opening of the New Acropolis Museum on 20 June 2009 will no doubt excite those who have waited for this moment to show to the world that Greece is capable of building a museum that can properly display all of the classical antiquities from the Sacred Rock.



The Parthenon atop the Acropolis in Athens is the most elegant and purest form of classical Greek art, combining the grandness of architectural form with stunning sculptural and decorative elements. It is like a marble beacon from the past, the monument of all monuments. When the famous English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley effusively declared, “We are all Greeks,” he was certain that the human form and the human mind had attained a perfection in Greece. The other great Romantic poet, John Keats, was also inspired by the marbled immortality of the sculptures of the Parthenon and famously enquired “What men or gods are these?”

But, sadly, the Parthenon also remains a monument divided, with about half of the sculptures, including a large segment of the incomparable Panathinaic Frieze, still sitting in the British Museum in London following their forced removal by Lord Elgin almost 200 years ago.

The New Acropolis Museum is and has always been the centrepiece of the campaign for the return of the Elgin Marbles. For years the Greeks have talked about building a new museum to house all of the known surviving Parthenon Sculptures. For years the Greeks have been taunted by the British Museum and its supporters with the catchery that the Greeks are unable to look after their own antiquities and that they lack a proper museum to house the sculptures even if they were returned. And for years the British Museum has dreaded this moment in history when an iconic new museum will rise from the ground in Athens to put a lie to these claims.

In the official history of the British Museum, its former director, Sir David Wilson wrote that after the late Culture Minister, Melina Mercouri, left office the demands for return became less vociferous and ultimately died down, occasionally bursting into life for a few days as one side or the other came up with a new argument or put a foot wrong. But a new museum would change all that.

As the former Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum, B M Cook, warned back in March 1991:

“The next phase of the campaign for repatriation is likely to begin any time after the actual start of construction of the

new Acropolis Museum. The problem has not gone away, it is merely in hibernation; and when it wakes up, our successors will find that it is fiercer than before.”

You would imagine, therefore, that 28 years later and in the full glare of the world’s media, and in the presence of Heads of State and important cultural dignitaries, heads of museums, and representatives from national committees for return of the sculptures, the Greek Government would seize the moment to promote the issue of return of the Elgin Marbles as an integral and significant part of the inauguration ceremony. In the brilliant Athenian light – and recalling Le Corbusier’s observation that the Parthenon affords us the “complete sensation of a profound harmony” of form and light – one would think that the Greek Government would make an impassioned and global demand for the sculptures’ return. After all, the *raison d’être* for the new museum has always been the return of the sculptures held by the British Museum. As the influential architecture critic of The New York Times has written, the new museum simply makes the argument for the marbles’ return.

After all, back in November 2002, the former Culture Minister in the PASOK Government, Evangelos Venizelos, declared that the Parthenon Hall in the New Acropolis Museum – once built – would function as an “ongoing challenge and invitation for the Marbles’ return and as “reminder for those who wish to keep the monument in a mutilated condition”.

In November 2007, whilst touring the new museum then under construction, Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis stressed:

“Με την κατασκευή και λειτουργία του Νέου Μουσείου της Ακρόπολης καταρρίπτεται και το τελευταίο επιχείρημα εκείνων που αρνούνται την ικανοποίηση ενός δίκαιου αιτήματος, όχι μόνο της Ελλάδας και των Ελλήνων, αλλά κάθε ανθρώπου που μετέχει στις αξίες που ενέπνευσαν και συνεχίζουν διαχρονικά να εμπνέουν τον ελληνικό πολιτισμό.”¹

The chairman of the International Association for the Return of the

Parthenon Sculptures, David Hill, has also stated in the presence of Greek Government officials that the new museum is a “major acquisition for Greece and the best argument for the return of the Marbles”.

And finally, in March 2009 Culture Minister, Antonis Samaras, declared that the New Acropolis Museum was the proper place for the dismembered sculptures to be displayed for the benefit of humanity.

Unfortunately, the rhetoric does not match the reality. Mr Samaras has in recent months indicated that the issue of the marbles’ return will not be raised because it will detract from the opening ceremony. It seems, incredulously, that the Karamanlis Government’s approach to the opening of the new museum will be yet another instance of the continuing reluctance of Greek Governments (of all political persuasion) to directly engage the British Government and the British Museum over this important issue.

The British must be laughing. In a clear indication of both its disdain and insecurity, the British Museum is sending but two curators to the opening. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has declined an invitation, as has the museum’s director Neil MacGregor. Under MacGregor’s watch, the British Museum has resorted to spin to deflect the mounting pressure for the return of the sculptures by carefully attempting to reposition itself as a so-called universal museum, by labelling itself at various times as the “Museum of the Enlightenment”, the “collective memory of mankind”, the “cache of civilisation”, a museum at the “centre of a conversation with the world” and therefore the logical repository for the marbles.

According to MacGregor, the life of the Elgin Marbles as part of the story of the Parthenon is over and they are now part of another story, that of the British Museum, in a not too subtle attempt to suppress the context of their origin. After all, in renaming the Parthenon sculptures the Elgin Collection by an Act of Parliament, the British not only saw themselves as the rightful heir to the cultural heritage of ancient Greece but at the same time they attempted to erase the Athenian origin of these artefacts as

a way of demonstrating British imperial supremacy. Even more insulting is the British Museum Trustees’ refusal to countenance the possibility of a joint curatorship agreement between the two countries that would see the sculptures brought together in the New Acropolis Museum. In rejecting the idea of a “British Museum outpost” the Trustees simply could not resist a crude appeal to empire.

Enough is enough. It is time for Greece to go on the offensive. The New Acropolis Museum responds magnificently to its historical and archaeological setting and establishes a dialogue that reaches across the centuries. The pressure for return of the Elgin collection of sculptures should therefore become the focal attention in the opening ceremony. On 20 June 2009 Prime Minister Karamanlis and Culture Minister Samaras must openly and directly and unequivocally announce to the world that the time has arrived for the British to confront the issue of return of the Parthenon Marbles without relying on obfuscation, denial, historical revisionism or cultural blackmail.

The International Association for the Return of the Parthenon Sculptures also calls on Britain and Greece at both government and museum levels to commence bilateral discussions and negotiations to reunite the known surviving sculptures in London and Athens through a broad and enlightened cultural cooperation, encompassing the possibility of long-term renewable loan arrangements, joint museum curatorship and stewardship, shared responsibilities and reciprocal loans of classical works to the British Museum.

The New Acropolis Museum must be the centrepiece of the strategy for return. And this must begin with the opening ceremony. The Greeks must finally take advantage of the magnificent new museum. For until the Parthenon Marbles are reunited in the New Acropolis Museum at the foot of the Sacred Rock, the Parthenon will continue to be haunted by Lord Byron’s lament, “Fair Greece Sad Relic”.

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