



Controversy over the preservation of early-20th century Art Deco apartments next to the museum was a major obstacle to its completion. Only two buildings, including 17 Dionysiou Areopagitou (left), remain after dozens of lawsuits to decide their fate. (RIGHT) Five of the original six caryatids from the Erechtheion on the Acropolis are installed on a porch intended to recall the building. The sixth is in the British Museum, and her space has been left deliberately empty.



the space required to place the temple's sculptures in their original positions, the dimensions turned out to be exactly those of the Parthenon. Of course they were - they were made for the temple.

But there the harmony ends. Next to and sometimes joined with the original sculptures - mellowed with age but still with the liveliness of marble - are lifeless white plaster casts of the missing pieces, most of which are in the British Museum. I found the contrast striking and disturbing, but that's precisely the point. This gallery is only partly about displaying sculptures. It's also about showcasing Greek demands for the return of the Parthenon Marbles. A metope with a scene of a centaur attacking a Lapith (a mythological people), is all plaster except for the Lapith's marble head, which is stuck into the panel. The taut muscles of Poseidon's marble torso from the west pediment stand in sharp contrast to the dull white of his plaster shoulders and back.

Even if you didn't know the marbles' whole story, the displays are unsettling. So is the decision to exhibit original blocks of the decorative frieze at full depth, while the casts are only half as deep, to illustrate

how Elgin had them brutally sawed off the building. Soon the words of Minister Samaras, who described the marbles as having been "abducted" and "being held hostage in enforced exile," came back to me. Wouldn't I be distressed on an emotional level if the Liberty Bell were broken into pieces along its crack and exhibited somewhere other than Philadelphia? Or if the Statue of Liberty still stood in New York Harbor, but with her head removed to Berlin and her torch to Moscow? To honor the museum's opening, several sculptural fragments that had been removed - including a foot of the goddess Artemis from a museum in Palermo and part of the foot of a lyre-player at Heidelberg University, as well as several pieces from the Vatican - were returned to Athens. It remains to be seen which, if any, other pieces will follow. For now, the British Museum remains emphatic that the marbles will stay in London.

After spending more time wandering through the museum on my own, I wanted to find Pandermalis and give him several photographs I had taken five years ago when I was in Athens and the museum was

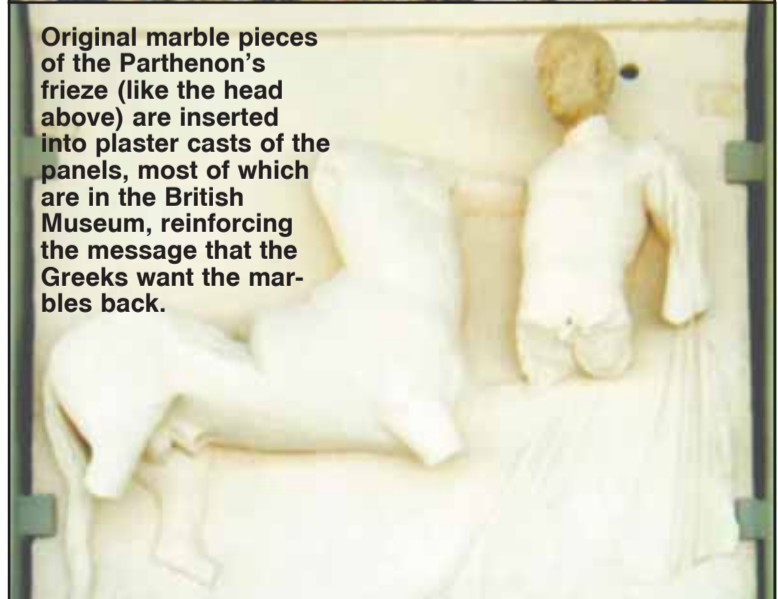
still under construction. Then the excavation area was filled with sand to protect it during construction, only the stumps of the columns that would eventually support the building were visible, and the olive trees had yet to be planted in the museum's garden. At that time we had talked about the 2004 Olympics had been dashed by a series of delays, including the ICOMOS lawsuit. Pandermalis had told me it was important to continue with plans to build the museum and figure out how to excavate and preserve the archaeology, and not to halt construction completely and "not touch anything." We also spent a lot of time discussing the marbles. We talked about their artistic significance, their historical importance, and of how confident he was that the museum's "permanent protest" for their return would be successful. I finally found Pandermalis in the courtyard giving an interview about the museum to Greek TV. "I have a gift for you," I said, thrusting the photos into his hand. "Do you remember when we took these?" Pandermalis took them from me. "Yes, I remember," he answered with smile that seemed to say, "But now we are ready."



At the museum's opening ceremony, culture minister Antonis Samaras fir a marble head of the goddess Iris into the Parthenon's frieze. The head has always been in Athens, while the rest of the panel is in London



In October 2007, cranes began to remove works of art from storage in the then-closed museum on top of the Acropolis to ready them for installation in the new museum.



Original marble pieces of the Parthenon's frieze (like the head above) are inserted into plaster casts of the panels, most of which are in the British Museum, reinforcing the message that the Greeks want the marbles back.



The second-floor Archaic Gallery showcases works dating from the seventh to fifth centuries BC. The gallery has only natural light and it's possible to walk around each sculpture, allowing the visitor to experience the works as if they were in their original settings.