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# The Parthenon Sculptures
## Emblems of British national identity

*Debbie Challis*

**1** *The Spoliation of the Parthenon Marbles by Lord Elgin* by William Gell (1777-1836). Watercolour, © Benaki Museum, Athens

**2** British Museum Entrance, London 2004. Photo: Debbie Challis

The Parthenon sculptures (Pls 1, 3, 4) were acquired by Parliament for the British nation in 1816, a time when constructions of national identity were being established and consolidated in the immediate aftermath to the Napoleonic Wars. These sculptures, which originated in Athens in the 5th century BC, became emblems of British national identity and have remained art objects allied to cultural nationalism in both Britain and Greece ever since. The *Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of sculpted Marbles* concluded, at the time, that 'no country can be better adapted than our own to afford an honourable asylum to these monuments of the school of Pheidias, and the administration of Pericles'.[1] Britain, apparently, had a unique claim to own, display and give the Parthenon sculptures 'honourable asylum'. The claim is more than nationalistic bombast, and it prompts the question why the sculptures from the Parthenon were believed to hold a unique relevance to Britain, of all places, in 1816. Historians have pointed to ideals of liberty and freedom that were claimed to be uniquely 'British' from the mid-18th century onwards: connections could be made between an idealized 'free' Athens and the belief in a liberty loving Britain.[2] Critics have also made links between the British victory – both military and psychological – over France and the need to lay claim to a different form of classical antiquity from that which could be associated with the ideals of republican and imperial Rome used by revolutionary France and Napoleon.[3] There is also the view that these art objects suitably displayed the power of British naval supremacy, simultaneously illustrating the will to dominate and the force to accumulate possessions. All of these interpretations are bound up within constructions of British identity.

The Parthenon sculptures are, notoriously, displayed in the British Museum (Pl 2), and their position there is disputed. There is a much publicized argument about whether Elgin had the right to remove and sell these sculptures, and whether they are really the cultural property of the modern Greek nation. The British Museum's mission statement, displayed on its website, merchandise and publicity, says that 'the museum seeks to illuminate the histories of cultures for the benefit of present and future generations'. It sells itself as a 'universal museum', a neutral space in which debates and discussion about objects can be held. It implies that visiting a museum is removed from socio-politics, and that the ownership and display of its objects is neither contested nor problematic. No museum, however, is an objective encyclopaedia of material culture. A museum institution is by necessity driven by particular political and national agendas.

The British Museum is a large public museum with a complex institutional history. Part of its function is as a 'universal survey museum' which, through the combination of its ceremonious architecture and its display of different objects from various forms of material culture, makes 'the nation a visible reality'.[4] The present position of the British Museum is based on a heartfelt belief that the British Museum can serve humanity while recognizing that museum objects serve a variety of political agendas. There is, however, little acknowledgement in the mission statement that the museum may in the past have colluded, both unknowingly and knowingly, in damaging human communities and cultural identities through its acquisition of objects. Nor is there any recognition that the British Museum, as a museum institution, let alone a 'national museum', serves a political agenda.

During the 19th century, the British Museum was called the 'National Museum', despite the fact that it did not concentrate on the history or collections of antiquities originating in Britain. The National Museum of Scotland (NMS), which was opened in the late 1990s, is more repre-

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sentative of what a national museum is perceived to represent in the early 21st century. The NMS depicts the history and culture of Scotland through displays of national artefacts created and produced in that country.[5] The British Museum, in contrast, holds collections from around the globe. Craig Clunes has pointed out that the collection could never be restricted to British objects for that would set a limit to the reach of British power as well as its gaze.[6] In 1870 a museum official, Edward Edwards, contended that 'a museum is the queerest place in which to raise petty questions of nationality. If it at all be worthy of the name, its contents must have come from the four quarters of the globe'.[7] However, elsewhere in his museum biography, Edwards promotes the enrichment of the 'National Museum' by 'distinguished men' who are all 'in one sense or other – Britons.'[8] It was important to Edwards that the archaeological explorers who transformed the antiquities galleries at the British Museum were Britons – for in that sense the British Museum was a British collection. This emphasis underscores the difficulty with constructing a solid British identity, since the British Isles were made up of four different nations, of which England was the most economically and politically dominant. Britain was a recent creation, born of the Act of Union that joined Scotland to England and Wales in 1707, which was followed by the 1801 Act of Union between Britain and Ireland. Linda Colley points out that Great Britain in the 18th century was an 'invented nation' that was 'superimposed onto much older alliances and loyalties'.[9] The British Museum was among other national institutions created in the mid- to late-18th century that were meant to serve the nation and embody learning.

National museums and galleries were as much products of the ideology of the new nation state as they were tools of Enlightenment learning. Nick Prior points out:

> Traceable in its modern form to the French Revolution, nationalism helped invent, imagine and stylize the nation through the raw materials of culture, and provided the script with which European nation-states authorised their social and political goals.[10]

Public museums aid a conception of nationhood. It is easy to see how the concept of nationhood is projected in a museum like the National Museum of Scotland, since the 'story' of the nation is told through artefacts from Scotland. It is less easy to see how the British Museum interprets such a vision of nationality, history and culture. It also has a history and ideological background different from the 'national museums' founded by Napoleon's puppet leaders across Europe. However, even a cursory reading of the 1816 parliamentary enquiry into the museum's purchase of the Parthenon sculptures reveals contemporary issues of national identity around the acquisition of these objects. Even towards the countries within the union of the British Isles, the British Museum has played a role based on imperial representation, which has verged on domination, not neutral learning. Elizabeth Crooke details the case of the Broighter Hoard in the late 19th century, a collection of Irish antiquities exhibited in the British Museum until legally challenged by the Royal Irish Academy in 1898. The then director of the British Museum, Sir Edmund Thompson, argued that the museum 'represents the Empire':

> It is not a London museum, it is a 'British Museum' and as such we naturally have to look after its interests, and make our collection as perfect as possible, to represent every portion of the British Empire.[11]

Despite this assertion, the hoard was sent back to Dublin as a result of the legal challenge. The world vision of the British Museum has frequently been challenged in its history and such events serve to draw attention to this vision and its problems. The British Museum was the 'national museum' of England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the Empire. The global vision and mission of the 'national museum' represented imperial power as well as intellectual learning and public education. This article argues that the purchase of the Parthenon sculptures lent historical and aesthetic authority to this mission.

## Forming the British Museum

The British Museum was formed by an Act of Parliament in 1753 and became the first major public museum in England.[12] The museum and library were first housed in Montagu House, and opened to visitors in 1759. The British Museum was, in theory, open to all and directly funded by the state, though a liberal policy of admission was reduced to restricted admission in 1761. The formation of the British Museum came less than a decade after the Battle of Culloden in 1745. Although this Scottish insurrection failed, Linda Colley notes that the museum was formed in a period of a 'more conscious attempt to enshrine and glorify national culture' and that the museum played a part in unifying the nation.[13] It did so by creating rituals of citizenship through the collection and display of objects from different communities across the globe. As a universal survey museum, it could unite Britain's nations, its Empire and communities within a narrative that 'illuminates' world culture more easily than a display of objects produced within a historically 'national' narrative. David Bindman has argued that the 'historical and mythical framework' of Britain was based on three claims: Britain as a protestant nation; Britain as an island and sea-faring nation; and Britain as the centre of the emerging British Empire.[14] Add to these the idea of 'freedom loving' as intrinsically British, and it is clear that the 'honourable asylum' given to the Parthenon sculptures fits into constructions of Britishness. The Parthenon sculptures, being original sculptures from 5th-century Athens, represent the power of a sea-faring ancient Greek city, an empire and a free state. The national museum was formed as a cultural and political expression of the modern nation state, playing a part in the celebration of a cohesive national identity. Flora Kaplan defines 'nation' as referring 'to those states comprised of heterogeneous ethnic groups having a common identity imposed and based on geographic boundaries established, defended and administered by a central authority'.[15] Britain was a multi-national state.[16] Britain and Britishness, as David Bindman suggests, remained 'a fluid concept that could accommodate other national identities'.[17] The main national institutions were centrally based in London, the English capital. It has been argued that the English were colonizers within Great Britain, exporting 'Englishness' at the expense of other, usually Celtic, national identities.[18] This view illustrates the complexity of British national identity. None the less, the formation of Great Britain at the beginning of the 18th century stressed a unified identity for all national and ethnic communities in the British Isles.

The formation of the British Museum reflected the growing importance of the museum within the structural and ideological development of the modern nation state. This is apparent in the positions of the museum's trustees, which were centred in the legislative bodies of the nation state and the British political system.[19] The three principle trustees were the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chancellor and the Speaker of the House of Commons. The other twenty official trustees were made up of various officials from gov-

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ernment, the church, law and civil service, including the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Lord Chief Justice and the Bishop of London. Six family trustees also made up the original board, consisting of two family members related to the main benefactors, Sloane, Harley and Cotton. Three family members of Townley, Elgin and Knight (significant 'antiquarians' whose collections were purchased for the museum) had joined them by 1830. The trustees are at the centre of the political establishment – the church, law and politics. The Principal Trustees alone reflected the Church of England (the Archbishop of Canterbury), legal authority (the Lord Chancellor) and Parliament (the Speaker of the House of Commons).[20] Though J Mordaunt Crook is right to recognize that the control of the British Museum was divorced from party politics, it is obvious from the list of trustees that the museum is embedded in the political realm. The appointments of family members as trustees signified a system of social hierarchy and patronage in relation to the bequest or sale of collections to the museum.

Britain was not alone in creating a public museum which reflected the nature of its system of national governance. In France, the Louvre was the largest public museum to be established. It opened in 1793 and, as Andrew McClellan sums up, 'embodied the Republican principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, all citizens were encouraged to participate in the experience of communal ownership and clearly many did'.[21] The Louvre was used as a cultural tool in the politics of the new Republic of France. In the early 19th century a significant difference between the British Museum and museums across continental Europe was the construction of 'state galleries' in countries conquered by Napoleon. These galleries echoed the structure of Napoleonic art institutions in France. For example, Napoleon's brother Joseph Bonaparte formed the Prado in Madrid in 1810, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam was founded under the rule of another of Napoleon's brothers, Louis Napoleon, in 1808.[22] The national museum became a cultural symbol for the nation and a space for the public across Europe. However, Britain was never occupied. Jean Louis Déotte has suggested that the Louvre embodied an enlightened 'politics of aesthetics' while the British Museum displayed a 'chaotic amassing of private collections', in both cases suggesting a representation of the political constitution of the respective country.[23] In 1816, the Parliamentary Enquiry into the Parthenon sculptures set an early precedent for the increasing use of government as a 'patron'. Though government politics did not influence the direction of the British Museum in the same manner as they had at the Louvre, the British Museum was at the centre of the nation state and played a part in promoting national identity.

In 1823, after the purchase of the Parthenon sculptures, Robert Smirke drew up plans for a new building to house the museum's ever-expanding collections and work was carried out on the buildings throughout the 19th century. Smirke's designs were neoclassical and 'the new British Museum was to be a veritable Temple of the Arts, recalling in its very structure the glories of ancient Greece'. This aim was influenced, as Mordaunt Crook illustrates, by the acquisition of the sculptures as, after this addition to the collections, Montagu House in 'style and scale' seemed 'inadequate as the home of the British Museum.'[24] Neoclassical architecture became the 'normal language for distinctly civic and secular buildings' which 'could well suggest secular, Enlightenment principles and purposes.'[25] Public museums and art galleries were intertwined with neoclassicism across Europe – conceptually and architecturally. In 1816, work began on the Glyptothek in the Bavarian capital Munich, and Leo von Klenze designed the museum so as to place the Aegina Marbles (bought by the Crown Prince of Bavaria in 1812) at the centre.[26] In Berlin, Karl Fredrich Schinkel designed much of the capital city of the Prussian state in a neoclassical style, including the Altes Museum (1823-30) which housed Antique and modern sculpture.[27] Michaela Giebelhausen argues that both the Altes Museum and the Glyptothek turn the museum into a monument 'to the idealized power of civilisation and the paternalistic concerns of the nation state.'[28] It is therefore unsurprising that classical antiquities filled the interior spaces of these neoclassical temples. The collection of classical antiquities was related to the need to provide cultural nationalism with ancient origins. Ancient Greece was, and is, considered to be the ancestral civilisation of modern western culture, and one of the ways in which European nations laid claim to their 'inheritance' was in the form of collecting material culture from the classical past.

**3** Illissos. Parthenon, West Pediment, Figure A (*c*438-432 BC). British Museum

**4** Riders in the Great Panathenaic festival. Parthenon, north frieze Slab XXXVIII, c440BC. British Museum

## The nation buys the 'Elgin Marbles'

The acquisition of the Elgin collection and the earlier acquisition of the Bassae Marbles set a precedent for acquiring antiquities 'excavated' from famous sites of antiquity. These acquisitions were in stark contrast to the recently purchased Townley collection, which was made up of individual pieces bought from various sites and auction houses. Elgin's use of his powers as ambassador set another precedent crucial to expeditions later in the 19th century, when diplomacy and archaeology was acutely intertwined. The Parliamentary Committee itself was a forerunner of committees increasingly held from the 1830s onwards to enquire

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into the use of art for public good and the function of the British Museum itself. The sale of Elgin's collection to the nation was a first formal step towards the 'pivotal role' of the museum in public culture in Britain.[29] The committee in 1816 set out to determine four points: the authority by which this collection was acquired; the circumstances under which that authority was granted; the merit of the marbles as works of art; and the importance of making them public property.[30] It was found that the collection of sculptures had not been a state enterprise, but that Elgin had used his office to acquire them, making their acquisition partially subsidized by the state. The terms of the *firman* he had been granted by the Ottoman authorities were considered adequate to allow the removal of such a large collection of sculpture from the Acropolis.

The latter part of the report is the most interesting. Various artists from the Royal Academy and antiquarians were invited to discuss both the artistic and financial value of the sculptures. In this context, aesthetic terminology around art defines the artistic excellence, the moral worth, and the monetary value of the Parthenon sculptures. The artists included Joseph Nollekens, John Flaxman, Richard Westmacott, Francis Chantrey, Charles Rossi and Thomas Lawrence. Francis Chantrey, shortly after the Parliamentary Committee, became 'the national sculptor' of the early 19th century and, as Alison Yarrington points out, his work was supposed to embody national identity since it was 'near to nature in its simplicity and untainted by any foreign influence'.[31] Chantrey was influenced by the values the Parthenon sculptures were believed to embody and, as a neoclassical sculptor, like Westmacott, it was in his interests that the sculptures were bought for the nation. It was also in both Chantrey's and Westmacott's interests as collectors that the sculptures were bought, and that Lord Elgin should be given proper recognition, and their own collections of antique sculptures and casts were later bequeathed to the Royal Academy, British Museum and the University Galleries at Oxford. The antiquarians and architects interviewed by the committee included Richard Payne Knight, William Wilkins, Taylor Combe, the Earl of Aberdeen and Charles Robert Cockerell. The antiquarians had an interest in ensuring Elgin would be honoured, as they too were involved in selling or bequeathing their collections to the British Museum. The architect CR Cockerell had, with other members of the Xenion Society, excavated and sold the Aegina Marbles to Bavaria and the Bassae sculptures to Britain, and so had a vested interest in defending the legality of Elgin's actions. Not surprisingly then, the sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens were agreed to be original works of art from the time of Periclean Athens. The artists interviewed agreed that they were 'first class works of art' and John Flaxman described the Marbles as the 'finest works of art I have ever seen', in which he was echoed by Charles Rossi.[32]

The famous painting of the *Temporary Elgin Room* at the British Museum by Archibald Archer shows the museum men (from Joseph Planta who was Principal Librarian, to John Conrath, a museum attendant) united with Benjamin West, President of the Royal Academy, in their appreciation of the Parthenon sculptures. The painting mirrors previous pictures of private collectors in the midst of their acquisitions, and Ian Jenkins aptly comments that it 'seems to mark the end of an era rather than the dawning of a new age'.[33] The parliamentary report shows the beginning of the intervention by government in the world of the visual arts. The Royal Society of Arts, formed in 1754, had previously been the main institution that encouraged the improvement of taste and manufacturing in the national state and, like the British Museum, was a product of enlightenment culture and a patriotic society.[34] Many of the artists giving evidence in 1816 had been involved in the Royal Society, and so the aim of improving taste among the population would have been a widely held ideal that the Parthenon sculptures could further. The 1816 Report concluded:

> But if it be true, as we learn from history and experience, that free governments afford a soil most suitable to the production of native talent, to the maturing of the powers of the human mind and to the growth of every… species of excellence, by opening to merit the prospect of reward and distinction no country can be better adapted than our own to afford an honourable asylum to these monuments of the school of Pheidias, and the administration of Pericles; where, secure from further injury and degradation, they may receive that admiration and homage to which they are entitled, and serve in return as models and examples to those who, by knowing how to revere and appreciate them, may learn first to imitate, and ultimately to rival them.[35]

The emphasis within the quotation is on the connection between 'free government' and artistic creativity embodied in the art works from ancient Athens which, according to the report, could only be replicated in Britain. The phrase 'opening to merit the prospect of reward' emphasizes a government based on enterprise and industry rather than on the democratic rights of every freeborn male citizen. This statement implies that ownership of the art works from ancient Athens is not only a national honour, but brings commercial and creative success along with it. The key phrase 'knowing how to revere them' implies that non-Britons cannot revere them or replicate their artistic industry. The acquisition of the sculptures from the Parthenon and other items from the Acropolis for the British Museum immediately accorded the national museum an international status, and these art objects were quickly absorbed in the national psyche.

## Displaying the Parthenon sculptures for the nation

The sculptures from the Parthenon fuelled the Greek Revival, and copies of the frieze from the Parthenon were displayed on buildings external to the exhibition space of the British Museum. In the 1820s, there was an architectural obsession with Athens and Athenian imagery. Emanuele Curti has suggested that an alternative image to Napoleonic France needed to be constructed, which meant turning away from the classicism inspired by Republican and Imperial Rome.[36] Napoleon had emptied the museums of Rome and transferred their contents to the Louvre, creating Paris as the 'new Rome'.[37] The influence of Athens is at its height after the defeat of Napoleon, and the Parthenon sculptures were purchased as cultural property of the British nation the same year that the art in the Louvre, looted from across Europe, was sent back to Rome and elsewhere. Explicit links are made between ancient Athens and contemporary London. Ian Jenkins comments:

> In 1816 the Italian marbles reached Rome and in that year a parliamentary enquiry recommended the purchase of Lord Elgin's marbles for the nation. Under her conquering tyrant, Napoleonic France had declared itself the new Rome: now with the Elgin marbles in London, England – the saviour of Europe – likened herself to freedom loving Athens after the Persian wars.[38]

This obsession with Athens, influenced by the work of Winckelmann, lauded a aesthetically pure model of classical art and one which reflected the political freedoms of democratic Athens. An emphasis on 'liberty loving' was a crucial

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**5** Hyde Park Gate, London, 2004. Photo: Debbie Challis

**6** Detail Hyde Park Gate, London, 2004. Photo: Debbie Challis

**7** Athenaeum Club, London, 2004. Photo: Debbie Challis

**8** National Monument, Calton Hill, Edinburgh, 2004. Photo: Debbie Challis

aspect in defining Britishness in the late 18 and early 19th centuries, particularly perceived as bound up in Protestantism opposed to Catholic tyranny.[39] The link between Athens and London, made through architecture and the display of the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum, was a sign of victory – military, moral and aesthetic – by Britain over Napoleonic France.

Sculpture was the most pedagogic model in art at this point, which again contributed to the importance of the sculptures. After the Battle of Waterloo, there was enthusiasm for monuments of mourning that was endorsed by state funds:

> The major public monuments raised in the capital were focal points of metropolitan improvements which provided a means of focusing attention in town planning upon the nation's achievements as well as expressing public enthusiasm and hero worship.[40]

This veneration of the heroic was influenced by the veneration of the classical model. Sculpted memorials encapsulated national identity within a single object contributing to the formation and dominance of the national monument. It is interesting that many of the artists involved in the parliamentary enquiry into the sale of the Parthenon sculptures were commissioned to design the numerous neoclassical monuments erected in the 1820s. For example, Richard Westmacott was responsible for *Achilles* (1815-22), *The Waterloo Vase* (1820-30) and, with JCF Rossi, Francis Chantrey and Edward Hodges Baily, executed the *Marble Arch* (1825-32) to designs by John Nash and John Flaxman.[41] The obsession with Athens was played out around the spaces of London. The *Gate at Hyde Park Corner* (1825, Pls 5, 6), designed by Decimus Burton, incorporated casts of the horsemen from the Parthenon running around the top with a figure of Britannia added to the centre. Through this use of the Greek horsemen from the Parthenon frieze on a significant war monument, direct parallels were made between the heroes of antiquity and the British cavalry who were the heroes of the Battle of Waterloo. In particular, Wellington, the victor of Waterloo, would have seen the monument clearly from the windows of his house. It is clear from the juxtaposition of the Athenian horsemen with a monument celebrating and commemorating Waterloo that the Parthenon horsemen became emblems both of British mourning and of national pride.

The Athenaeum Club, also built by Decimus Burton (1827-30), continued the theme of London as the new Athens. A gold statue of Athene stands above the doorway of the club, and a version of the Parthenon frieze runs around the top of the building (Pl 7). London was not alone in aping the monuments of Athens, although Edinburgh appropriated the Parthenon building rather than its sculpture: William Playfair and Charles Robert Cockerell had plans for a Scottish National Monument on Calton Hill, which was a replica of the Parthenon (Pl 8). The National Monument commemorated the Scots killed in the Napoleonic Wars, and George IV laid the first stone in 1822. However, the funds ran out in 1829 and all that remains are ruins of an uncompleted building overlooking the city.[42] The Parthenon sculptures rapidly became established as emblems of British identity through their reproduction and artistic influence on neoclassical sculpture and architecture, and through being anchored to national monuments and buildings.

By the 1830s the Parthenon sculptures were firmly established as museum objects in London. Ian Jenkins comments

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that 'casts of the Elgin Marbles became de rigueur for academic institutions both in this country and abroad' during the first half of the 19th century.[43] The opening of the permanent Elgin Room was combined with the remoulding of casts from the Parthenon sculptures in the 1830s, which met a demand for copies from within Britain and the continent. Most of the casts were sent to public institutions and museums. The Board of Trustees for the Royal Institution in Edinburgh in 1835 and the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin requested casts of the frieze. George IV bought casts of the Parthenon frieze for the Manchester Institution in the 1820s, to adorn the interior of what is now Manchester City Art Gallery, in the self-proclaimed capital of the industrial north of England.

In the 1830s and 1840s, casts of the Parthenon frieze were part of the interior decoration in two new major museums in England, and dictated the display of art within their galleries. The University Galleries at Oxford, built in the early 1840s, incorporated the frieze into the top of the walls in the Long Gallery in the West Wing; and in the Entrance Hall copies of the Bassae frieze were used as decoration on the Grand Staircase. The University of Cambridge requested casts of the Parthenon frieze in May 1837 as plans for the Great Picture Gallery of its new Fitzwilliam Museum, designed by George Basevi, and subsequently featured continuous casts of the frieze that run around the top, and two caryatids at the entrance to the gallery.

The main Entrance Hall of the Fitzwilliam (not completed until the 1870s) was to have casts of the Bassae frieze incorporated into its walls. This use of sculpture in the museums at Oxford and Cambridge reflects the hierarchic layout of the sculpture galleries at the British Museum: that is, the Parthenon sculptures, the artistic emblems of excellence, were approached through lesser, though still important, works of art.

The reproduction of casts in museums was not confined to the early 19th century: as late as the mid 1860s, casts of the Parthenon sculptures took pride of place in the Sculpture Gallery of the new National Gallery of Ireland.[44] The Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston, one of a large number of provincial museums established in the 1870s, embedded the Parthenon sculptures in the walls of its main gallery to present the development of ancient civilizations.[45] Copies of the Parthenon sculptures increasingly became embedded in the walls of museums across Britain, and institutions abroad, helping to 'normalize' the display of the Parthenon sculptures within the British Museum; and in some cases this directed the way in which art was displayed.

## Taking the Greek 'inheritance' forward

The cultural ancestry of ancient Greece, therefore, played a role in informing notions of Britishness (and more generally European identity) in the early 19th century. This role was partially enacted in debates on the ancestors and the descendants of ancient Greeks. The Principal Librarian of the British Museum from 1827-56, Sir Henry Ellis, published an unofficial guide to the Elgin and Phigaleian Rooms in 1833 for the relatively popular and inexpensive series, the 'Library of Entertaining Knowledge'.[46] In his 'Concluding Remarks', Ellis claims that western civilization is derived from ancient Greek culture since this civilization continued to develop in Europe. He further argued that in classical antiquity are the origins of 'our moral, intellectual and social existence' and 'from which we trace a descent neither doubtful nor disputed, though our line is not direct'.[47] Ellis contended that contemporary nations can claim direct racial descent from the ancient Greeks if they are of Germanic stock, and considered northern Europeans the heirs of the ancient Greeks. An Austrian traveller and theorist, Jacob von Fallmerayer, had published his conclusions on the ethnology of the modern Greeks in a *History of the Peloponnese* in 1830. Fallmerayer, through studying the origins of place names and history of medieval Greece, contended that the modern Greeks were not the descendants of the ancient Hellenes and there was no racial continuity between the ancient and modern inhabitants of Greece.[48] Fallmerayer's arguments were formulated concurrently with the formation of the Modern Greek nation state in which the racial and cultural continuity of the Greek nation was a founding precept. A combination of Ellis's and Fallmerayer's arguments therefore provided a justification, in nations that could claim 'direct' racial descent, for the ownership of works of art from ancient Greece. The physical ideal embodied in the 'classical body' also became of national importance. If these theories were fully applied, then, the arument might run, Greek antiquities were being brought 'home' and the national appropriation of the Parthenon sculptures in Britain was entirely natural. Both these two differing arguments about the descendants of ancient Greece point towards a change in emphasis in arguments and terminology around race, nation and identity. Ellis' claims are not remarkable for their time but serve to illustrate how embedded the Parthenon sculptures had become in British cultural nationalism by the 1930s.

The British Museum holds antiquities, ethnographic material, prints and numerous other items from across the world. It is a universal survey museum that unifies the diversity of its collections by proclaiming itself as an encyclopaedia of world culture. The Parthenon sculptures were important objects in this 'encyclopaedia' and were endowed with a unique national significance in the early 19th century. Their display in the British Museum imparted a cultural status to classical antiquities exhibited in the museum later in the century. If Britain was projected as the true modern heir of ancient Greece, then other classical antiquities should naturally be displayed alongside the Parthenon sculptures in the national museum. The importance of the classical past in the construction of modern Greek national identity, in part to locate themselves both as heirs and ancestors to European civilization, shares similarities with the language used in the 1816 report on the purchase of the sculptures. In the early 19th century, Greek intellectuals were establishing an identity between modern Greece and its glorious classical past. In the early 19th century Adamontios Korais expounded the belief that the material remains of Greece were a crucial legacy for modern Greece and Greeks, who were the true heirs of classical antiquity. Kyriakos Pittakis put this archaeological nationalism in practice, particularly on the site of the Acropolis, when he became *ephor* of antiquities in Greece in 1836. Sofia Voutsaki debates the ambiguity of archaeology and the Greek relationship with the classical past, finding that in Greece the past is inextricably bound up with the present.[49] One of the effects of this relationship between the classical past and present is the demand for the restitution of the Elgin Marbles by Greek governments since the 1980s. The Parthenon sculptures and the Acropolis, as emblems of ancient democracy and the dawn of western civilization, have themselves become embedded in modern Greek national identity. Modern Greece has argued that the *firman* used to justify the legality of Elgin's actions was not only ambiguous but fundamentally illegal since Greece was then an occupied country – the Turks gave away what was not theirs to give – and that the buildings on the Acropolis were damaged by

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Elgin's actions. The notion that they are art objects that can be simply bought, sold and exchanged or that they belong to the cultural nationalism of one country is flawed. There are more historical similarities and links between the use of the Parthenon sculptures as national icons by both modern Greece and the British Museum than either side would currently like to admit. The Greek claims to Elgin's collection have often been denounced by authorities at the British Museum as nationalist 'powerpolitics', while, as we have seen, the Parthenon sculptures were used as national symbols for Britain soon after their acquisition, and served to enrich the contents of the national museum.

The British Museum's position on the restitution debate is that it is not about ownership but displaying 'everyone's culture' in one place for 'maximum public benefit'. The present Director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, contrasts this stance to the Greek use of the Parthenon sculptures as 'an instrument of nationalist politics'.[50] It is clear that the sculptures, as John Mack points out, 'have been implicated in a great number of architectural and cultural contextualizations since their original creation', as are all art and historical objects removed from their original location and period.[51]

The Parthenon sculptures were endowed with a unique cultural and national significance when they were purchased for the nation in 1816. This significance was due to the political and aesthetic climate of the early 19th century, but the Parthenon sculptures remained embedded in the cultural nationalism of Britain. It is only as the intellectual and cultural debate about defining and redefining Britain has become prevalent that the restitution of the sculptures has become more publicly acceptable. In turn, the British Museum directs and is subject to, debates around British identity and cultural nationalism. Centering the museum as an omniscient objective institution with no sense of national identity or place in the cultural politics of Britain obscures the history of the British Museum and its use as a social institution more generally. It is not a matter of creating a 'blame culture', whereby imperialist politics and cultural aggrandisement are blamed for loss of other communities' cultural heritage, though some recognition should be made of the harm caused by the removal of material objects from nations and peoples. More to the point, the unpacking of Britishness and Englishness, and how these identities are forged with regard to cultural objects and museums, cannot be made unless the wider range of issues are recognized. We should not polarize the debate over the restitution or retention of the Parthenon sculptures between, on the one hand, the nationalism of Greece and the universal vision of the British Museum, or, on the other, the cultural rights of modern Greece and the predatory imperialism of the British Museum. Instead we should re-direct attention to historical and contemporary issues of the display of art objects and the deployment of the Parthenon sculptures in the visual iconography of both Britain and Greece.

1 P.P. (1816), *Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculpted Marbles* (=P.P. 1816), p15.
2 For example, Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, London, 2003 (=Colley).
3 For example, Ian Jenkins, 'Athens rising near the Pole', Celina Fox, ed, *London: World City*, New Haven and London, 1992 (=Jenkins, *London*), pp143-53.
4 Carol Duncan & Alan Wallach, 'The Universal Survey Museum' *Art History*, III, 4 (December 1980), pp448-69, p454.
5 For more on the National Museum of Scotland see JM Fladmark, ed, *Heritage and Museums. Shaping National Identity,* Dorset, 2000. The National Museum and Gallery of Wales takes a similar narrative route through the display of its archaeological objects, as does the National Museum of Ireland.
6 Craig Clunes, 'China in Britain: The Imperial Collections', Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, ed, *Grasping the World. The Idea of the Museum* Aldershot, 2004 (=Preziosi and Farago), pp461-72, p463.
7 Edward Edwards, *Lives of the Founders of the British Museum, with Notices of its Chief Augmentors and Benefactors, 1570-1870*, II, London, 1870, p551.
8 Ibid, p667.
9 Colley, p5.
10 Nick Prior, *Museums and Modernity. Art Galleries and the Making of Modern Culture*, Oxford, 2002, p40.
11 Quoted in Elizabeth Crooke, *Politics, Archaeology and the Creation of a National Museum of Ireland*, Dublin, 2000, p131.
12 The Ashmolean Museum has valid claim to being the first museum in England, but in essence it was a private collection owned by the University of Oxford.
13 Colley, pp85-6.
14 David Bindman, *Inventing Britain: British Art and National Identity*, London, 2004 (=Bindman), p2.
15 Flora ES Kaplan, 'Introduction', Museums and the making of 'Ourselves'. The Role of Objects in National Identity', Flora ES Kaplan, ed, *Museums and the making of 'Ourselves'. The Role of Objects in National Identity* London, 1994, pp1-15, p3.
16 David Powell, *Nationhood & Identity. The British State since 1800,* New York, 2002, p2.
17 Bindman, p. 5
18 Philip Dodd, 'Englishness and the National Culture', David Boswell & Jessica Evans, ed, *Representing the Nation: A Reader. Histories, Heritage and Museums*, London, 1999, pp87-108, p97.
19 Nicholas Pearson, *The State and the Visual Arts. A Discussion of State Intervention in the Visual Arts in Britain, 1760-981*, Milton Keynes, 1982, p1.
20 J Mordaunt Crook details the status of the Trustees in *The British Museum: a case study in architectural politics*, Middlesex, 1973 (=Crook), p52.
21 Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre. Art, Politics and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth Century Paris*, Cambridge, 1994 (= McClellan), p9.
22 For more on the Prado see Janis A Tomlinson, 'State Galleries and the Formation of National Artistic Identity in Spain, England and France 1814-1851', Michelle Facos and Sharon L Hirsch, ed, *Art, Culture and National Identity and Fin-de-siècle Europe* Cambridge, 2003, pp16-38.
23 Jean-Louis Déotte, 'Rome, the archetypal Museum, and the Louvre, the Negation of Division', Preziosi and Farago, pp51-65, p59.
24 Crook, p71.
25 Carol Duncan, 'Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship', I Karp and SV Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, London, 1991, pp88-103, p91.
26 Dieter Ohly, *The Munich Glyptothek. Greek and Roman Sculpture,* Munich, 2002, p155.
27 Martin Steffens, *K. F. Schinkel 1781-1841. Ein Baumeister im Dienste der Schönheit*, Köln, 2003, p48
28 Michaela Giebelhausen, 'Introduction: the architecture of the museum', Michaela Giebelhausen, ed, *The Architecture of the Museum. Symbolic Structures, Urban Contexts*, Manchester, 2003, pp1-14, p4.
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30 P.P. (1816), op cit, p1.
31 Alison Yarrington, 'Anglo Italian Attitudes. Chantrey and Canova', Linda Sicca and Alison Yarrington, ed, *The Lustrous Trade. Material Culture and the History of Sculpture in England and Italy* Leicester, 2000, p133. Also Alex Potts, 'Chantrey as National Sculptor of early Nineteenth-Century England', *Oxford Art Journal*, IV (November 1981), pp17-27.
32 P.P. 1816, pp31-2.
33 Ian Jenkins, *Archaeologists and Aesthetes in the Sculpture Galleries of the British Museum, 1800-1939*, London, 1992, pp75-6.
34 The Royal Society ran yearly exhibitions of art and manufacturing products from its inception until 1849. Derek Hudson and Kenneth W Luckhurst, *The Royal Society of Arts 1754 – 1954,* London, 1954.
35 P.P. 1816, p15.
36 Emmanuele Curti, 'Re-inventing Pheidias: Athens, Modern Britain and the Politics of Culture', given at the Neale Colloquium in British History at University College London, 3-4 March 2000.
37 McClellan, p119.
38 Jenkins, *London*, pp143-53, p147.
39 Colley, pp30-42. Arguably, Britain represented expansionist imperialism and repressive reactions to political challenges from the lower classes rather than being 'freedom loving', see Eric Hobsbawn, *The Age of Revolution. Europe 1789 – 1848*, London, 2000, pp135, 257.
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41 Ibid, pp217-52.
42 Anon, *Remarks on the Intended Restoration of the Parthenon of Athens as the National Monument of Scotland,* Edinburgh, 1824.
43 Ian Jenkins, 'Acquisition and Supply of Casts of the Parthenon Sculptures by the British Museum, 1835-1939', *Annual of the British School of Athens*, vol 85 (1990), pp89-114, p105.
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45 Giles Waterfield, *Palaces of Art. Galleries in Britain 1790-1990*, London, 1991, p87.
46 Henry Ellis, *The British Museum. Elgin and Phigaleian Marbles. Volume 1 and 2,* p218.