

Cleaning the Parthenon Sculptures

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“The sculptures are their own best witnesses,” proclaimed Director Robert Anderson in his statement of welcome at the Twenty-third British Museum Classical Colloquium, “Cleaning the Parthenon Sculptures.” Like many eyewitnesses to events, however, the sculptures tell different and sometimes conflicting tales. The conference was organized in response to criticisms that the so-called Elgin Marbles sustained severe damage during restoration in 1938–39. Recently revived by the historian William St. Clair in the third edition of *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*, these accusations were buttressed with additional archival documents in the fall 1999 issue of this journal.¹ The goals of the colloquium were twofold: to provide a clear account of what happened to the sculptured reliefs that once decorated the Parthenon and, in particular, to report on a recent examination undertaken by a team of Greek conservation scientists. Assessing the cleaning operation of sixty years ago against the backdrop of the accepted practices of the day brought forward a number of questions both technical and ethical. What is the nature and significance of the surviving surfaces of the Parthenon sculptures, and to what extent are museums responsible for full disclosure of the treatment of the objects in their care?

The proceedings began with St. Clair’s review of the evidence assembled so far. Noting that Elgin obtained permits to study and remove some marbles through bribes amounting to 25 percent of his overall costs, St. Clair stressed that the British ambassador’s intentions were a benevolent attempt to rescue unique examples of fifth-century B.C. sculpture from certain depredation at the hands of Ottoman officials and other foreign interests. According to St. Clair, the surfaces of the relief figures were largely intact upon their arrival in London and showed evidence of the original polychrome and added metal ornament. Exposure to extreme fluctuations of temperature and humidity in the nineteenth-century smogs of industrial London, he suggests, hastened a process of decay (although anyone who has experienced both an Athenian summer and winter will suspect that envi-

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ronmental effects were already well under way by 1807). St. Clair set the stage for much of the debate that followed by emphasizing several key charges.

The “honey-colored patina” and traces of surface color represent the original appearance of the Parthenon, and thus the scraping of the surfaces seriously impedes our full understanding of the monument. By allowing Lord Duveen, a wealthy donor and trustee, full reign to direct the reinstallation according to a legacy of anachronistic aesthetic regard for “whiteness” in ancient sculpture, the museum lost control of one of its most important possessions. Finally, an ongoing pattern of euphemism, evasion, and cover-up by the museum raises doubts about institutional stewardship and public accountability.

Assistant Keeper Ian Jenkins, among the foremost international experts on the history of the Elgin marbles, offered a much-anticipated official perspective on the 1938–39 cleaning. Confirming that the sculptures suffered from the application of chisels and abrasive carborundum to a large portion of dirt-blackened surfaces, Jenkins conceded that the breakdown in museum oversight was a scandal. The museum does not claim impeccable curatorship, he reminded the audience, and restoration was consonant with contemporary standards of practice in other places, including Athens. Works of art cannot be frozen in time but have lives that reflect the understanding of their caretakers. During the examination by scientists from the Greek Archaeological Service and Stone Conservation Center in Athens, Jenkins collaborated closely with the effort to map the extent of cleaning. He offered an accounting of the percentage of loss occurring on the frieze, pedimental figures, and metopes that differed somewhat from the conclusions of the Greek conservators. Two and a half millennia of natural weathering and two centuries of treatment account for the fact that much of the “honey-colored patina” (an ancient, artificial coating, he believes) had largely disappeared before the Duveen intervention. In a precirculated paper, a number of factual errors in St. Clair’s publication were pointed out. Jenkins escalated the emotional pitch of the meeting when he stressed in sharp terms that the Elgin marbles are in better condition than they would have been had Lord Elgin not removed them. The tragedy lies in the continued decay of the remaining figures in the polluted urban environment of modern-day Athens.

A series of excellent presentations on the conservation of the Parthenon sculptures on the Acropolis, offered by Drs. Mantis, Papakonstantinou, Skoulikidis, and Trianti, demonstrated that many professional factors have influenced the approaches taken by Greek conservators. Removal or in situ conservation, close assessment of change and damage, and appropriate methods of cleaning away soot and gypsum deposits have regularly been debated in the light of the Venice Charter. Mantis’s summary of the results of the Greek team’s November 1999 examination of the sculptures in the British Museum characterized their cleaning as regrettable. Using the evidence of plaster casts and early photographs, he confirmed

that significant portions of the original surface have been effaced. Papers by Galanos and Kouzeli demonstrated the structure of the surface layers and the relationship of polychromy to the applied surface treatments and marble crystals below. This is a vital issue, because original surface represents the most valuable tool in assessing a sculpture's craftsmanship, artistic intent, and subtleties of plastic form. Key evidence for these aspects of the ancient reliefs were clearly lost during the cleaning urged by Duveen.

Terminology played a large part in the debate over the extent and nature of the injuries sustained by the marbles. *Patina*, *epidermis*, and *crust* were among the various terms employed to describe the surface and changes that it has undergone. It became clear that even among professional conservators there was little agreement on the chemical and biological processes that have had an impact on the stone surface. In the small difference of two letters between "rubbed" and "scrubbed" lies the conflict between those who view the over-cleaning as unfortunate but not of devastating consequence and those who decry the ruination of Phidias's figures. It is a philosophical conflict that centers on notions of authenticity and the proper degree of human intervention in the passage of time. Such considerations have long been central to the field of conservation, but what must surprise observers most of all is the lack of consensus about the technical features of the marble. How is the "patina" formed? Is it an applied coating from antiquity that was periodically renewed up through the early medieval period, or is it a mark of natural weathering? How does Pentelic marble react in different environmental settings, and what does comparative data from other ancient monuments in Athens reveal? Despite the decades of progress in stone conservation and centuries of scholarship lavished on this icon of classical art, it is amazing that large gaps in our knowledge of its physical state remain to be filled.

In many ways, the conference was a model for how works of art are configured in a dialogue between science, art history, and cultural criticism. By assembling an interdisciplinary panel of experts, who offered spontaneous observations on the presentations, many compelling issues were brought to the fore. It is possible to highlight only a few of these here. Conservator John Larson and curator Vinzenz Brinkmann made insightful observations on the role of applied color as the "final form" of a sculpture and the bearer of iconographic, symbolic, and pictorial meaning. Other scholars emphasized instead interiority, the corporeal form below the skin. Discussions over the validity of using vintage photography and romantic-era artists' sketches as indicators of patina leaned on the side of those who viewed such evidence with cool skepticism. In one of the most astute papers, Mary Beard took up the cultural identity of the Elgin marbles, which have been indelibly marked not so much by the hands of man and nature as by their uprooting from the original context and re-placement in a context of contestation. "Precisely because it is a storm in a teacup," she wrote in a recent publication of her remarks

in the *Art Newspaper*, “it is a debate of absolutely central importance to a range of other issues—from our most fundamental conception of what an antiquity is, to our notion of the whole role of the museum and its representation of the past in contemporary life.”²

As press accounts have since delighted in reporting, it was almost inevitable that this decorous gathering of prominent scientists and art historians would nearly derail over the simmering restitution controversy. The return of the marbles to Greece was not on the conference agenda but colored the tone of much of what was said or implied. Restoration procedures of the past would stand as little more than incidents in the lifespan of a work of art, were it not that one argument for rightful ownership is that the sculptures have been “better off” in England. By now the debacle of conferees dining on tea sandwiches while feeling the scraped or polished contours for themselves is infamous. It seemed to some at least to mark a cavalier attitude toward objects whose worth has been strongly inflected by the politics of national patrimony. Just as at the May 1999 “Who Owns Culture” conference at Columbia, it was unfortunate that the subject of ownership revealed unseemly personal agendas and pique on the part of the antagonists. We might well join Stephen Urice in his call for a debate on cultural restitution in which interested parties—archaeologists, politicians, and collectors—would be banned from the podium and thinkers from very different disciplines engaged to consider the philosophical issues.³

Several conclusions can be drawn that help to locate the 1938–39 cleaning controversy in historical perspective.

- The surfaces of the Elgin marbles were altered in the 1938–39 restoration, when methods were adopted that were harsher than those routinely practiced but were by no means unusual for the time. Some information now considered fundamental was lost. Just how much remains to be seen.
- Conservation, just as art historical research, must be viewed in the context of what was known and deemed relevant at the time. Different questions are now posed and are informed by shifting academic concerns.
- The activities of Duveen are not a newly discovered chapter in the history of the museum’s stewardship. Chagrin over the lapse in authority was soon replaced by fear for the safety of the sculptures during World War II. If the museum has since been reticent about releasing the full documentation, it may be understandable in the atmosphere of scandal that has surrounded the incident. Full disclosure of all museum records bearing on the history of the art and antiquities in their care is nevertheless a highly desirable goal, now more than ever.
- Balance sheets of past rights and wrongs, personal motives, and institutional agendas will never suffice to determine questions of ownership

of disputed cultural heritage. Such decisions, if pursued, will be purely political ones. Understanding the many lives of artifacts and the cultural meanings attached to them will aid in preserving heritage that is endangered today by actions and attitudes that belong squarely in the past. In this area, the Elgin marbles can teach us important lessons.⁴

Although consensus on what autopsy of the upper strata of marble actually reveals, a chief aim of the conference, was not attained, one positive outcome will be the formation of an international team of scientists charged with a full documentation of the monument. A detailed history of restoration and environmental change, as called for by Wolf-Dieter Heilmeyer, will explain what happened and why. From this we are bound to learn information essential to the preservation of monuments *for the future*. A publication of the proceedings with expanded contributions from the panel of experts is also forthcoming.

NOTES

1. William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles: The Controversial History of the Parthenon Sculptures* (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 1998), chap. 24; *id.*, The Elgin Marbles: Questions of Stewardship and Accountability, 8 *Int'l J. Cultural Property* 391–521 (1999).
2. Mary Beard, What Are We All Talking About, 99 *Art Newspaper* (18–19 January 2000).
3. Stephen Urice, Conference Report: Who Owns Culture: The International Conference on Cultural Property and Patrimony at the Casa Italiana, Columbia University, New York City, 8 *Int'l J. Cultural Property* 563–67 (1999).
4. See the provocative essay by Y. Hamilakis, Stories from Exile: Fragments from the Cultural Biography of the Parthenon (or “Elgin”) Marbles, in *The Cultural Biography of Objects*, 31:2 *World Archaeology* 303–20 (1999).