

Ways to stand alone

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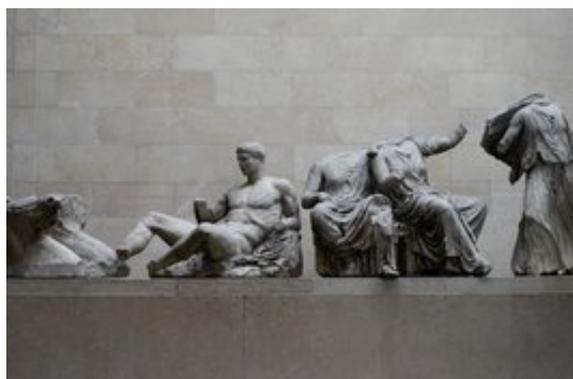
KEEPING THEIR MARBLES

How the treasures of the past ended up in museums – and why they should stay there

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Photograph: © Dylan Martinez/Reuters

Museums are also places of scholarship and research, where artefacts are gently probed to give up their secrets: for example, marble sculptures often bear minuscule traces of chisel marks, paint and varnish, leaving precious clues about the ancient sculptor's art. Today, however (or so Jenkins claims),

the right of museums to hold and display their collections, and their reasons for doing so, are under question Collections are as often condemned as "loot", "plunder", "pillage", or "booty", as they are lauded as interesting, revealing, or beautiful. The underlying assumption is that museums are not the proper place for such artefacts, that these institutions may even do more harm than good. Indeed, museums have been placed under such scrutiny that I fear for their future.

This hostile scrutiny, as Jenkins shows, comes as much from within museums as from outside. Museum curators and directors "have become increasingly reluctant to mobilize the important scientific and moral arguments for retaining objects of historic significance in collections". The book's central argument, in Jenkins's own words, "is that the negative cloud surrounding museum institutions is as damaging to their work as are the specific claims for the return of ancient treasures. The negativity around museums today invites repatriation claims, and undermines the good

The photograph on the dust jacket of Tiffany Jenkins's *Keeping Their Marbles* shows a museum display of breathtaking elegance and beauty. Two dozen small fragments of marble sculptures seem to float in mid-air, fixed to one another and to the plain white base of the display with simple brushed steel rods. A good three-quarters of the original sculptural group is lost, but the viewer's imagination fills in the gaps with little effort. At the left, a female figure dashes in, reaching towards a rearing horse, perhaps pulling at its flying reins; at the centre, two huge figures, one male, one female, stand locked in struggle. In the sculptures, everything is motion and energy. By contrast, the gallery space that surrounds them is crisp and minimalist, with nothing to distract the viewer's attention from the astonishing objects on show – except perhaps the wooded hills just visible outside the window, with the sun setting behind them. It is hard to imagine a better illustration of the book's subtitle: "How the treasures of the past ended up in museums . . . and why they should stay there".

Keeping Their Marbles begins with a paean of praise for the cultural and moral value of museums. "For more than three centuries, museums have acquired treasures of the past so that visitors to the British Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, to name but a few, can wonder at the ingenuity and creativity of humanity."

reasons for museums to hold artefacts”.

A bleak picture indeed. But take another look at the last three paragraphs, and note how often Jenkins refers, without further specification, to “museums” or “collections”. Is it really the case that all museum collections are facing the kind of existential threat that Jenkins’s apocalyptic tone might imply? The Science Museum in London, the Ankara Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, the Prado in Madrid – none lie under a “negative cloud”, and none (so far as I know) face any serious challenge to the integrity of their collections. Worldwide, museums are in a phase of confident expansion; as Jenkins notes in her conclusion, around a hundred new museums open in China every year, and spectacular new branches of the Louvre and Guggenheim are currently under construction in Abu Dhabi.

Jenkins’s fears for the future of “museums” and “collections” in fact pertain only to a small and atypical group of institutions: the old universal museums of Western Europe and the United States, such as the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Many of these “universal” museums now prefer to describe themselves as “encyclopaedic”, for reasons that Jenkins explores in fascinating detail.) The British Museum, to take only the best-known example, is packed with artefacts gathered from the four corners of the earth: Greece (the Parthenon Marbles), Egypt (the Rosetta Stone), Iraq (Assyrian reliefs), Nigeria (the Benin bronzes, also scattered across another dozen European and American museums). This extraordinary collection was built up in the colonial era under what were often – to put it mildly – less than savoury circumstances. As Christopher Hitchens once remarked, it would be more apt if, like its poor relation south of the river, the British Museum called itself the Imperial Museum.

So when Jenkins laments the reluctance of curators “to mobilize the important scientific and moral arguments for retaining objects of historic significance in collections”, she is really being a bit naughty. No one disputes that the Benin bronzes or the Rosetta Stone should be retained in “collections”; self-evidently, a museum is the right and proper place for these objects. The point at issue is *which* collection is the more appropriate home for the Benin bronzes: the imperial museum of the state that destroyed and plundered the city of Benin in 1897, or, say, the Lagos National Museum in Nigeria? Jenkins contends that, in almost every case, the right place for such objects is their present location in the huge “encyclopaedic” museums of Western Europe and the United States – what she calls “our great museums” or, more revealingly, “museums we can easily visit”. (“Easily”, that is, if we are lucky enough to live in London rather than Lagos.)

Jenkins’s argument falls into two parts. The first half of the book (Chapters 1–4) explores the history of Western museums and their collections, from sixteenth-century cabinets of curiosities to the present day. The botanical and zoological expeditions of James Cook make for a slightly odd starting point: the ethical issues raised by museum collections of shells or plant specimens are surely quite different from those relating to unique human artefacts. After a well-balanced account of the formation of the major European imperial museums, Jenkins turns to the practical means by which their collections were formed. In almost every instance, as Jenkins usually makes clear, the flow of artefacts was stimulated, directly or indirectly, by European imperialist ambitions.

At times we might usefully have been told a bit more about this wider geopolitical (and often colonial) context. So Lord Elgin’s removal of the Parthenon sculptures between 1801 and 1806 – presented by Jenkins as a selfless attempt to rescue priceless artefacts from the vandalism of ignorant Turks – was in fact only made possible by the Ottomans’ desperate need of British military assistance against the French occupation of Egypt. Elgin, the then British ambassador to the Sublime Porte, had the Turks over a barrel; had it not been for the British military presence in Egypt, there is not the slightest possibility that anyone would have given him permission to saw off huge chunks of the Parthenon.

Throughout this section, Jenkins maintains a scrupulous focus on the declared motives and aims of the individuals, learned societies, generals and armies responsible for hoovering up the artefacts of the non-European world, and insists that it is wrong for us to pass retrospective judgement on the morality of their actions. “Things were different in the past. Actions and deeds were permitted and approved of then that would not be now . . . We should judge the past on the terms of the past, rather than by what we feel is right today.” Whatever we may think of the ethics of Napoleon’s occupation of Mamluk Egypt, it is largely thanks to the French “excavators and invaders” (in Jenkins’s words) that we

know as much as we do about the ancient Egyptians. “And it is for this reason that it is, on balance, right that these great monuments and sculptures were taken from their original context and are now on display for all to see their wonders.”

I do worry about the logic of all this. Even if one accepts that it is *expedient* for scholarship that one of Napoleon’s officers discovered the Rosetta Stone, and that it is *fortunate* for its survival that this stone ended up in the British Museum rather than built into the floor of an Egyptian mosque, that does not mean that it is therefore *right* for the stone to stay in Bloomsbury in perpetuity, when there are marvellous museums in Cairo and Alexandria where it could be reunited with other monuments of its place and time. Consider the ominously large collections of Jewish and formerly Jewish-owned art and artefacts which entered many mainland European museums two generations ago. The museums have no doubt preserved these artefacts with great care and diligence: would Jenkins therefore consider it to be, “on balance, right” that these great works of art “were taken from their original context and are now on display for all to see their wonders”? Sometimes we *are* entitled to pass judgement on the past “by what we feel is right today”.

The second half of the book turns to the present day, and gives a wide-ranging conspectus of what Jenkins sees as the contemporary crisis of confidence in the museum world, ranging from the rise of “identity museums” such as the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC (Jenkins is not a fan), to the populist misuse of repatriation claims by unscrupulous governments (“The British Museum is a symbol of Britain; and making it bend and bow to Turkey is a way of showing that Turkey has power and influence”), to the return of human remains to indigenous communities, or at least their removal from public display for religious reasons (“It is appalling that objects have been taken off the shelves and hidden from view”).

Perhaps inevitably, the case of the Parthenon Marbles is discussed at particular length. (I should declare at this point that I am a member of the British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, a pressure group of some thirty years’ standing which keeps chipping away – not yet, it is true, with much success – at this monumental issue.) Unlike the Benin bronzes or the Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum were once an integral part of a larger monument, a tremendous temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, the rest of which (including almost half of its surviving sculptures) is still in Athens. The case for the return of the Parthenon Marbles to Athens is essentially an argument about artistic unity: how can it be right for a single, coherent masterpiece such as the Parthenon to be arbitrarily divided between two different countries?

You will not be surprised to learn that Jenkins is a repatriation sceptic. There are, she thinks, “good reasons for the continued separation of the two sets, and for the retention and display of the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum”. For example, she is particularly struck by the fact that “It is not possible to call any of the pieces from the Parthenon, when isolated from the others, inartistic. What is so interesting about them is that they are still magnificent when standing alone”. This strikes me as a curious argument. Take an analogy drawn, once again, by Christopher Hitchens: imagine that the Mona Lisa had been sawn in half during the Napoleonic wars, and that one half had ended up in a museum in Copenhagen, the other in Lisbon. Neither half, isolated from the other, would be inartistic; each would still be magnificent when standing alone. But that would not be a good reason for their continued separation from one another.

At the start of this review, I praised the glorious cover photograph of *Keeping Their Marbles*. The photo shows the surviving sculptures from the west pediment of the Parthenon, displayed with sensitivity and tact in a museum space of the most extraordinary beauty. The museum in the photograph is the Acropolis Museum in the city of Athens, one of the world’s truly great museums, which houses not a single item looted, stolen, or bought from a country poorer than the Athenians’ own. The female figure on the left, a study in kinetic energy, is the goddess Iris. The head of the goddess is original, but her body is a plaster cast; Iris’s body today stands in the Duveen Gallery of the British Museum. Dull is the eye, wrote Byron, that will not weep. He was right.