‘It’s Mine. My Own. My Precious’:

The Interweaving of Imperialism, Colonialism, and Identity in the British Museum

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The British Museum considers itself to be an encyclopedic museum, and as such it holds objects from around the world as a trustee of shared cultural heritage, asserting that it is not a national museum, but instead a global one.[1] This claim, and the implications that follow it, have increasingly been called into question since the end of the twentieth century, and it is important to acknowledge this institution's historic association with colonization and empire. The Parthenon Marbles held by the British Museum are a prominent example of the interwoven nature of British identity with colonial and imperial tendencies.[2] While these specific colonial and imperial configurations of identity were especially prevalent over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, late twentieth and twenty-first century discourse demonstrates that the British Museum has not completely moved beyond colonial reasoning in its mandate and approach. The twenty-first century marks increasing resistance to the decisions made by the British Museum regarding cultural patrimony and markers of identity. The British Museum both informed, and was informed by, a complex colonial and imperial identity. At the centre of this identity was the notion of British superiority, which the British Museum supported, and to some extent continues to support, in a variety of ways. The mandate of the museum, to hold onto objects from around the globe in an act of trusteeship, stems from Enlightenment thought and is closely tied to colonialism and imperialism. This paper traces the origins of the British Museum and examines how the museum worked to create a specific perception of the past through its organisation and discourse. The Parthenon Marbles are used as a case study of how the British Museum has appropriated cultural heritage and re-written history to fit into a

[1] For discussion of encyclopedic museums, and the encyclopedic nature of the British Museum specifically, see: Cuno, James. *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[2] 'Colonial' refers to (primarily negative) British interactions with colonies and ways of thinking that promote a colony/colonizer mindset; 'imperial' refers to the actions and ramifications of the British empire, of which 'colonial' is closely associated with. In the context of this paper, 'imperial' is only used to describe instances and actions during the period when the British empire was active, while 'colonial' can apply to both historic, and current, periods of discussion.

British narrative of superiority. The British Museum acts as an archive that interprets the past in a specific way and justifies Britain's claim on numerous items of cultural importance by arguing that it is well equipped to house these objects. This line of reasoning is particularly problematic, as it allows the shadow of colonial and imperial thought to remain ingrained in the foundations of the British Museum and impact the perceptions of history that this national institution promotes.

Neil MacGregor, a past director of the British Museum, writes of the museum's mandate of trusteeship, a concept that dates from the Enlightenment period: to hold and preserve objects from around the world on behalf of humanity.[3] MacGregor asserts that the British Museum was established specifically as a place for the entire world to enjoy, and recalls the request made by the donor of the museum's initial collection, Sir Hans Sloane, that the museum be used by as many people as possible.[4] The idea of the British Museum as a trustee informs the picture it has of itself as an encyclopedic museum. Undoubtedly, a collection spanning great temporal and geographical distances has its benefits, which MacGregor emphasized above all else. Museum visitors are able to examine objects in a wider, global context, and compare different types of items.[5] MacGregor discusses a Maori good luck charm, given to Captain James Cook, and brought to the British Museum in 1774, as one example of this. He argues that objects like these could be used to demonstrate that all societies think and behave in almost identical ways.[6] Through such cross-examination, individuals with racist or chauvinistic biases against certain

[3] Neil MacGregor, "To Shape the Citizens of 'That Great City, the World,'" in *Whose Culture?: The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 43, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7pgrk.
[4] MacGregor, "To Shape the Citizens of 'That Great City, the World,'" 39-40.
[5] Ibid., 42.
[6] Ibid. 43.

cultures might learn to adjust their assumptions.[7] If a visitor saw beautiful pieces of art from an area of the world that they had previously held to be inferior, displayed in the same museological space as objects from societies they considered to be superior, they may see common connective threads between cultures and view them as unique and equal rather than simply different. Despite aspiring to be a museum for all the world, the British Museum still informed the identity of the *British* people, accomplished in varying ways throughout the museum's history. It is important to start by examining the origin of the British Museum's foundational collection, as it was intrinsically connected with imperial and colonial history–a history that became interwoven with identity through the British Museum.

Sir Hans Sloane was a British physician and collector who operated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Over the course of his lifetime, he collected a wide array of objects and specimens, which he donated to the British nation at the time of his death.[8] Sloane's will requested that the British government purchase his collection for twenty thousand pounds, and use it as the basis for a free, national, public, encyclopedic museum.[9] As discussed above, Neil MacGregor saw the British Museum's origin as a positive event, the beginning of the museum's mandate of trusteeship. He failed to properly recognize the stark reality that the British Museum was built on colonial and imperial exploitation, in the form of Sloane's collection. Sloane worked as a physician for the governor of Jamaica from 1687 to 1689, during the period when this Caribbean island was growing increasingly profitable for the British Empire through slavery and sugar. After returning home to Britain, Sloane married an English widow who had inherited

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[7] Christine Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect it (1st ed.)* (Routledge, 2009), 50, https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.4324/9781315635934.

[8] James Delbourgo, "Slavery, Empire, and the Cabinet of Curiosities: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum," lecture, The University of Virginia, February 28, 2018, Charlottesville, VA, YouTube Video, 58:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TcDQovoFD0.

[9] Delbourgo, "Slavery, Empire, and the Cabinet of Curiosities: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum."

sugar estates from her late husband.[10] Sloane would subsequently earn incredible profits from his wife's plantations, making around thirty thousand pounds, which is roughly equivalent to three million pounds today. Thus, while Sloane's income partly came from his medical salaries, a large portion of his wealth came from his connection to the Atlantic slave trade and profits from Caribbean sugar plantations. It was this wealth that allowed Sloane to collect so avariciously–Sloane's collection was made possible by colonial and imperial connections, which he utilized to the best of his ability.[11] Without a colonial and imperial Britain, Sloane would neither have been able to establish the global networks he used to accumulate his collection nor have been able to build up the great wealth he needed to fund his collective exploits. The history of the British Museum, when traced back to its founder, cannot be removed from the fact that imperialism and colonialism were major parts of its inception, and these forces continued to impact the British Museum for many years after it was established.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British Museum functioned as an administrative centre for the British Empire, "enacting a fantasy of control over information, peoples, and colonies through the compilation of knowledge."[12] In a sense, the British Museum was an imperial archive, and the simple fact the nation of Britain held so many items of cultural importance created a sense of British importance. Through the acquisition and control of objects from around the world, the British Museum showcased the wide reach of British control, and thus the country's significance as a global power. At the end of the nineteenth century, the director of the British Museum, Sir Edmund Thompson, proclaimed that "[i]t is not a London museum, it is a 'British Museum' and as such we naturally have to look after its interests, and

[10] Delbourgo, "Slavery, Empire, and the Cabinet of Curiosities: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum."
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ruth Hoberman, *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism* (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 134, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wrkdc.

make our collection as perfect as possible, to represent every portion of the British Empire."[13] Imperial collections of cultural property reinforced nineteenth century British ideas about the country's leading position in a global hierarchy–made possible through the British empire–and this strong imperial identity is clearly demonstrated by Thompson's words. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, the British Museum was referred to as the 'National Museum', even though the majority of the objects located within did not originate in Britain.[14] In 1909, the past curator of the Taiping Museum, F. W. Knocker, detailed the importance of museums for imperial Britain, explaining that colonial administrators could study the objects displayed in museums to better understand the colonized people they were dealing with.[15] Knocker spoke at a Museum Association conference, and his words are emblematic of the colonial thought which underscored museum discourse in the twentieth century. Collections of culturally diverse artifacts also encouraged the public who attended museums to associate with the knowledge that stemmed from and the control that was demonstrated by museum displays.[16] Such artifacts originating from around the world demonstrated that Britain was able to accumulate and control far beyond the boundaries of its single nation.[17] This colonial context is an important aspect of the British

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[13] Quoted in Debbie Challis, "The Parthenon Sculptures: Emblems of British National Identity," *The British Art Journal* 7, no. 1 (2006): 34, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41614663.

[14] Challis, "The Parthenon Sculptures: Emblems of British National Identity," 33.

[15] Hoberman, *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism*, 136; see F. W. Knocker, "The Practical Improvement of Ethnographical Collections in Provincial Museums," in *The Museums Journal: The Organ of the Museums Association Vol 9*, ed. F. R. Rowley (London: Dulau and Co., 1909), 191-203, https://books.google.ca/books?id=mXZUAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA191&lpg=PA191&dq=fw+knocker+%27%27The+Practical+Improvement+of+Ethnographical+Collections+in+Provincial+Museums.%27&source=bl&ots=VLLzf1arZc&sig=ACfU3U0KrOb5g6kxd9_31zWwBYlpUV_8dg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiGzJKm-9_3AhX8IzQIHStCDMQQ6AF6BAgdEAM#v=onepage&q=fw%20knocker%20"The%20Practical%20Improvement%20of%20Ethnographical%20Collections%20in%20Provincial%20Museums.'&f=false.

[16] Hoberman, *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism*, 136.

[17] Sharon Macdonald, "Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities," *Museum and Society, 1*(1) (2015): 3, https://journals.le.ac.uk/ojs1/index.php/mas/article/view/3/50.

Museum's history and must be considered when examining how the museum has informed and continues to inform British identity.[18]

The identity of a nation is built on a shared interpretation of history, used to bolster the self-image of a group of people, or community.[19] Political scientist Benedict Anderson focuses on community as a defining characteristic of nationalism, writing that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."[20] Around the turn of the 20th century, the British Museum presented a few specific images of history, examined below, which worked to promote an identity of superiority for the British people. In the early 1900s, Sidney Colvin, art critic, author and director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, wrote of the British Museum as the "*epitome of the civilization of the world* [emphasis mine]."[21] This claim summarizes what the British Museum conveyed about the past and the nation of Britain at the time Colvin was writing. The idea that Britain is the exemplar of human progress is also physically manifested in the architectural facade of the British Museum. Its front entrance features pediment sculptures that were created to represent the theme of 'The Progress of Civilization' (See Appendix A). [22] The British Museum's Principal Librarian between 1827 and 1855, Sir Henry Ellis, described how the museum's pediment sculpture depicted this idea. Starting with the Eastern end of the

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[18] For a detailed overview of the origins of the British Museum and this institution's connection to Sir Hans Sloane, see: James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum (*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[19] Tom Carter, and Iain Robertson, "'Distilling More than 2,000 Years of History into 161,000 Square Feet of Display Space': Limiting Britishness and the Failure to Create a Museum of British History," *Rural History* 27 (2), Cambridge University Press (2016): 216, doi:10.1017/S0956793316000054.

[20] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (United Kingdom: Verso, 2006), 7.

[21] "Sidney Colvin," The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, accessed May 19, 2022, https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/about-us/directors/sidney-colvin; Sidney Colvin, *Memories and Note of Persons and Places, 1952-1912* (London: Edward Arnold and Co., 1921), 201, https://archive.org/details/memoriesnotesofp00colvuoft/page/n10/mode/1up?ref=ol&view=theater.

[22] Chris Wingfield, "Placing Britain in the British Museum," in *National Museums: New Studies from Around the World (1st ed.)*, ed. Simon Knell et al. (Routledge, 2011), 125, https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.4324/9781315787312.

pediment, humanity is shown as emerging from what Ellis deems "a rude savage state," followed by their personification as a hunter and a tiller. Ellis then discusses the focal point of the pediment sculpture: a figure which embodies *Astronomy,* an art that represents civilizations who worshipped heavenly bodies, such as the Egyptian and Chaldean civilizations.[23] Ellis concludes with the assertion that civilization, in general, has progressed a long way, and such European ideas of progress are seen in the sculptures personifying mathematics, drama, poetry, music, and natural history.[24]

When museum attendees begin their visit to the British Museum by viewing a facade that nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers saw as representing the progress of civilization, they are prepared for a journey through the British Museum that places them at the end point of such "progress of civilization." This is true, even though the pediment sculptures do not specifically depict the British Museum or Britain as a nation. This particular identity promoted by the British Museum, which is examined in detail below, was made possible by imperialism. The general notion of "civilization" was used by multiple European nations at this time, allowing them to compare themselves with other nations during a period of global expansion. European nations sought to promote themselves as countries building civilization.[25] During the nineteenth century, Europe considered itself to be uniquely civilized, contrasting with other countries which European nations at the time might describe as primitive or barbaric.[26] The Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography received special attention between 1866 and 1921, a period which corresponded with the British Empire's widest area of geographical control. During

[23] Eric Gidal, *Poetic Exhibitions: Romantic Aesthetics and the Pleasures of the British Museum* (United Kingdom: Bucknell University Press, 2001), 11.
[24] Gidal, *Poetic Exhibitions*, 11.
[25] Patrick Manning, "'Civilization' in History and Ideology Since 1800," *New Global Studies* 16, no. 3 (2022): 333, https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2021-0049.
[26] Immanuel Wallerstein, "Eurocentrism and its Avatars: The dilemmas of Social Science," *Sociological bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1997): 26, https://ijsw.tiss.edu/greenstone/collect/sbj/index/assoc/HASH0132/2075d622.dir/doc.pdf.

this interval, Britain and other colonial European nations acquired cultural iconography and objects from subject nations or nations which they considered to be inferior to them.[27] British imperialism allowed Britain to see itself "as the inheritor of a tradition that encompassed the whole world and all of history."[28] By incorporating a plethora of cultures into the British framework of control, in addition to defining the nation of Britain in contrast to other, 'uncivilized people,' Britain actively defined itself as the culmination of human civilization.

This image of British cultural superiority, built on the British Museum's interpretation of the past, is reinforced by museological discourse and organization.[29] British author Henry Shelley's 1911 guide to the British Museum, *The British Museum: Its History and Treasures*, features a chapter titled "Civilization in the Making," a title it shared with the museum's ethnographic gallery.[30] The display allowed visitors to explore what the museum positioned as the evolutionary process of humanity, always finishing their exploration in an exhibit dedicated to then-modern Britain.[31] In arranging items chronologically, in a gallery titled "Civilization in the Making," the museum was relaying the implicit message that Britain was the culmination of human civilization.[32] Shelley refers to 'civilized ideas' (of modern Britain), contrasting them with the 'savage' peoples whose items were displayed in the ethnographic section of the British Museum, and who (according to the museum's arrangement of the past) represented the starting points of civilization.[33] Shelley writes of the British '4 o'clock ceremony,' which he interprets as

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[27] Salima Ikram, "Collecting and Repatriating Egypt's Past: Towards a New Nationalism," in *Contested Cultural Heritage: Religion, Nationalism, Erasure, and Exclusion in a Global World*, ed. Helaine Silverman (London; New York: Springer, 2010; 2011), 141, doi:10.1007/978-1-4419-7305-4.

[28] Wingfield, "Placing Britain in the British Museum," 135.

[29] Hoberman, *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism*, 137.

[30] Ibid; see Henry C. Shelley, *The British Museum: Its History And Treasures: a View of the Origins of That Great Institution, Sketches of Its Early Benefactors And Principal Officers, And a Survey of the Priceless Objects Preserved Within Its Walls* (Boston: L.C. Page, 1911), 299.

[31] Hoberman, *Museum Trouble: Edwardian Fiction and the Emergence of Modernism*, 137.

[32] Ibid. 136.

[33] Shelley, *The British Museum*, 301, 310.

being an evolved form of the 'messy Tibetan process.'[34] The connection made here between the cultures of historic Tibet and modern Britain demonstrates the way the British Museum ordered history to promote British civilization. The implications of Shelley's words are: though British tea traditions may have been partly based on another culture's heritage, the British 'perfected' the process by supposedly developing it beyond the 'messy,' and thus imperfect, Tibetan form. This small area of the British Museum's past, which might easily be forgotten, becomes an incredibly important example of how much influence even the smallest artifacts can have on a person's perception of history. The evolution of tea drinking, in the context of the British Museum, is synonymous with the evolution of culture—Britain, without question, is placed at the top.

Other areas of Shelley's work continued to promote the importance of Britain. Museums often work to highlight the cultural, technological, or moral superiority of their home nation through contrast with others.[35] Further examples in *The British Museum: Its History and Treasures* do exactly this, positioning the modern British citizen as having a form of kinship with, but being superior to, the 'savage' people of the past.[36] Shelley discusses dress and fashion that he considered unlikely to influence current European standards, and the fact that, though a brooch from Tibet might be somewhat acceptable to modern sensibilities, the women of 'civilized' lands would likely find it too bulky.[37] Shelley states that museum visitors would be surprised by the fact that the Azandeh people of the Congo had an advanced musical instrument, again implying the inferiority of another culture while bolstering British identity.[38] Both of these points emphasize the perceived inferiority of the cultural artifacts Shelley describes, in the face

[34] Shelley, *The British Museum*, 310.
[35] Macdonald, "Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities," 3.
[36] Shelley, *The British Museum*, 310.
[37] Ibid. 314.
[38] Ibid. 315.

of European, and therefore British, excellence. Discussion later turned to statues of deities. Shelley writes that these deities would be considered ludicrous in the eyes of monotheistic, civilized, Christian observers, but that they also seem to demonstrate "the groping of man after God. . . ."[39] To claim such a thing is to insert British and Christian ideals into a completely different context, the result of which is to imply that the religious reality of modern Britain was what historic cultures were trying, and failing, to attain.

This restructuring of history places Britain at the forefront of civilization's evolution in a more concrete way than some of the previous examples, as it supposedly shows how past peoples strove, at least unconsciously, to reach the level of culture that modern Britain enjoyed, therefore elevating British cultural and religious standards to the pinnacle of humanity. Finally, Shelley includes the Bronze Benin statues in his guide, which he writes were taken to avenge the deaths of Europeans who had been killed in British-colonized West Africa. Shelley theorizes that one of the most striking pieces in the Benin collection, made in the image of a female head, was the craftsmanship of a white man who taught the Beni, or perhaps a particularly assiduous one of his pupils.[40] The "white man" in this statement could easily symbolize British authority. At the same time, the assertion that the best work in the Benin collection must have been made by someone of the same ethnic background as Britons would be a logical conclusion to arrive at after travelling through a display emphasizing British superiority.

The display of objects, alongside information about where they originate from and what their perceived value is, allows museums to show people what their society has collected and laid claim to as its heritage.[41] Cultural property is frequently utilized to create a sense of national

[39] Shelley, *The British Museum*, 320.
[40] Ibid. 323-324.
[41] Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect it (1st ed.)*, 31.

identity and pride and is put to varied political uses in ethnic, regional, and national contexts.[42] Britain can legally claim artwork as being British, even if a piece is not made in Britain or by someone who is British, and does not depict a theme related to Britain, as long as at least one of the three Waverley Criteria can be applied to it. These export criteria are the main guiding principles used to determine whether an export license should be granted for "objects of cultural interest," and are still used in twenty-first century Britain.[43] When an object's worth is greater than a certain threshold, or if that object has been held by Britain for over 50 years, an expert advisor is required to assess whether the item is a national treasure, using the Waverley Criteria. The export of objects can thus be denied through the application of these criteria.[44] They state that a work of art must be "closely associated with British history and national life; [considered to be of] outstanding aesthetic importance; or [demonstrate] outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning, or history."[45] This questionable legal clause complicates debates about who owns cultural property and ensures that it does not matter if items displayed in a British museum are from within the country. The Parthenon Marbles are a perfect case study of the problems that come from the Waverley Criteria and stolen cultural property in general.

The Waverley definition of what is British allowed the Parthenon Marbles to become ingrained in British society from their acquisition.[46] The Marbles were sculpted in the fifth century B.C.E. Athens, and were sold by the Ottoman Empire to the British nobleman Thomas

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[42] John Henry Merryman, "The Public Interest in Cultural Property," *California Law Review* 77, no. 2 (1989): 339-350, doi:10.2307/3480607.
[43] UK Government, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Export Controls on Objects of Cultural Interest: Statutory Guidance on the Criteria to be Taken Into Consideration When Making a Decision About Whether or Not to Grant an Export Licence.* March 2015: 5, https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Export_criteria_March_2015.pdf.
[44] *Export Controls on Objects of Cultural Interest*, 5.
[45] Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect it (1st ed.)*, 48.
[46] Challis, "The Parthenon Sculptures: Emblems of British National Identity," 33.

Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, in the nineteenth century.[47] The legality of Lord Elgin's acquisition of these sculptures is contested in Britain and around the world, in part because Greece was occupied by the Ottoman Empire when Lord Elgin purchased the sculptures, and as a result, the Greek people had no say in their removal.[48] The British Museum bought the Parthenon Marbles in 1816, and they continue to occupy a prominent place in its display today.[49] The Parthenon Marbles are very specific pieces of cultural property.

In an open debate with a fellow scholar published in a 1999 edition of *The Guardian*, the Artwatch UK director, Michael Daley, discussed the universality of classical art and the Parthenon Marbles. He writes that "[n]o art is less rooted in territory or 'national cultural identity' than classical Greek art. Can you not see the sense in which great art transcends origins and belongs to the world?"[50] Daley's first claim is resolutely untrue, as modern Greece sees the Parthenon Marbles as an important link to their ancestors and heirs, and has argued how objects, like these sculptures, are intrinsically tied to the personhood of a nation.[51] Modern Greek hybrid identity stems from a foundation of memory, symbols, and traditions, each of which creates strong links between the past and the present.[52] Daley's words also have an ironic ring to them, for the Parthenon Marbles were used to bolster Britain's own national identity; the relocation of ancient Greek art to the British Museum allowed educated Europeans, notably Britons, to study

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[47] Fiona Rose-Greenland, "The Parthenon Marbles as Icons of Nationalism in nineteenth-century Britain," *Nations and Nationalism* 19 (4) (2013): 658, doi: 10.1111/nana.12039; John Henry Merryman, "Thinking about the Elgin Marbles," *Michigan Law Review* 83, no. 8 (1985): 1882, https://doi.org/10.2307/1288954.

[48] Challis, "The Parthenon Sculptures: Emblems of British National Identity," 38.

[49] Merryman, "Thinking about the Elgin Marbles," 1882.

[50] Michael Daley, "Should the Elgin Marbles be returned to Greece? No," *The Guardian*, November 27, 1999, B2.

[51] Derek Gilman, "Heritage and National Treasures," in *Whose Culture?: The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 23, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7pgrk.

[52] Vasiliki Kynourgiopoulou, "National Identity Interrupted: The Mutilation of the Parthenon Marbles and the Greek Claim for Repatriation," in *Contested Cultural Heritage: Religion, Nationalism, Erasure, and Exclusion in a Global World*, ed. Helaine Silverman (London; New York: Springer, 2010; 2011), 160, doi:10.1007/978-1-4419-7305-4.

it, and thus validate perceived notions of ancestral heritage and intellectual superiority.[53] Additionally, while Daley argues that art like the Parthenon Marbles transcends its origins, in reality, Britain created a new origin for these sculptures by firmly establishing them as markers of British identity.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the trustees who oversaw the British Museum believed that they had inherited an ancient tradition of civilization.[54] In the years following the Parthenon Marbles' accession by the museum, public discourse emphasized London as a 'New Athens.' Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain frequently claimed ancient Greece as the origin point of British culture.[55] Britain argued that liberty and freedom were uniquely British ideals, and saw classical Athens as a precursor and model for their nation based upon these two values. During the nineteenth century, many other European nations also considered Greece to be their cultural ancestor.[56] The Parthenon Marbles are both the emblems and enforcers of this identification. David Bindman, a professor of the History of Art at University College London, argues for a British historical-mythical framework that is centred around three claims about Britain: that it is a Protestant nation; that it is an island and sea-faring nation; and that it was the focal point of the British Empire.[57] Associating contemporary Britain with classical Athens validates this national myth; Athens was an imperial power for close to a century in the fourth century B.C.E., built its empire through its naval force, and has been held up as a fierce preserver

[53] Kynourgiopoulou, "National Identity Interrupted: The Mutilation of the Parthenon Marbles and the Greek Claim for Repatriation," 158.
[54] Wingfield, "Placing Britain in the British Museum," 125.
[55] Angela Esterhammer, "Translating the Elgin Marbles: Byron, Hemans, Keats," *The Wordsworth Circle* 40, no. 1 (2009): 30, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24045261.
[56] Martin Bernal,"The Image of Ancient Greece as a tool for colonialism and European hegemony," in *Social Construction of the Past: Representation as Power*. ed. Angela Gilliam and George C. Bond (Kiribati: Routledge, 1994), 127; Challis, "The Parthenon Sculptures: Emblems of British National Identity," 33.
[57] "David Bindman," Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, Harvard University, accessed May 19, 2022, https://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/people/david-bndman; Challis, "The Parthenon Sculptures: Emblems of British National Identity," 34.

and promoter of democracy.[58] Nineteenth century British thought promoted Britain, not Greece, as the true owner of classical Greek artwork; it was argued that Britain could claim to be a 'direct racial descendant' of ancient Greece, which helped legitimize Britain's control of the Parthenon Marbles.[59] Imperial British archaeology at the end of the nineteenth century also reflected British ideas of inheriting ancient culture. British archaeologists emphasized that Britain "was located where several streams of cultural influence from the Near East had converged," and that their nation (alongside other Western European countries) was the true spiritual heir of the ancient Near Eastern culture.[60] The British Museum's Assyrian holdings might reflect this tradition. Both arguments, positioning Britain as the inheritor of great classical cultures, effectively displace the people of the Near East and Greece from their cultural legacies. The promotion of British identity by such supersession thus actively degrades the validity of other identities considered to be less important. Britain, and the British Museum, are both rewriting history to legitimate their control of objects from other countries, and using other nations' cultural heritage to rewrite history, in a cyclical colonial scheme.

In 1816, a British report asserted that "[n]o country can be better adapted than our own to afford an honourable asylum to these monuments of the school of Pheidias [the Parthenon Marbles]."[61] This claim clearly affords Britain a level of superiority over other nations, including the marble's original home, Greece. In the heavily imperial period of the nineteenth century, such a declaration may not be considered out of the ordinary and fits into this paper's exploration of how the British Museum as a whole supported and promoted an imperial and superior national

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[58] See Donald Kagan, *The Fall of the Athenian Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.7591/9780801467271.
[59] Ibid. 38.
[60] Bruce Trigger, *Artifacts and Ideas: Essays in Archaeology (1st ed.)* (Routledge, 2003), 80, https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.4324/9781351324083.
[61] Ennio Quirino Visconti, Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, Select committee on the Earl of Elgin's collection of sculptured marbles, *Elgin Marbles* (London: J. Murray, 1816), 45.

identity. However, a very similar proclamation regarding the Parthenon Marbles' place in Britain found its way into recent discourse. The headline of a 2002 statement given by Neil MacGregor in his capacity as Director of the British Museum reads: "'the British Museum is the best possible place for the sculptures from Parthenon in its collections to be on display.'"[62] Around the same time as this headline was written, a group of prominent museums, including the British Museum, signed a *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums* which called for people to see the collections of so-called universal museums as the global heritage of humanity.[63] By disassociating the Parthenon Marbles from their political, social, and historical context through the lens of universalism, the British Museum is then able to claim that the Parthenon Marbles are understandably part of British identity, as they help to define the British people and inspire their artistic endeavours, while bringing a level of civility and enrichment to British life, and stimulating British scholarship.[64] The British Museum's current statement regarding the Parthenon Marbles, taken from their website, asserts that "[t]he Trustees of the British Museum believe that there's a great public benefit to seeing the sculptures within the context of the world collection of the British Museum, in order to deepen our understanding of their significance within world cultural history."[65] However, this line of thought brings with it the shadow of colonialism, as the original cultural context and history of the Parthenon Marbles is displaced and reinterpreted by the British Museum, echoing historical British colonial actions. As examined below, colonial justifications accompany the British Museum's continued control of the Parthenon Marbles.

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[62] Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect it (1st ed.)*, 26.
[63] Sarah A. Hughes, "The British Museum in Print," in *National Museums: New Studies from Around the World (1st ed.)*, ed. Simon Knell et al. (Routledge, 2011), 193, https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.4324/9781315787312.
[64] Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect it (1st ed.)*, 40.
[65] Trustees' statement, *The position of the Trustees of the British Museum*, The British Museum, London, England, https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/objects-news/parthenon-sculptures/parthenon-sculptures-trustees.

Dr. Vasiliki Kynourgiopoulou, an expert on cultural heritage, refers to a "cultural stock market" which develops from global policies advocating for cultural heritages to be considered one interrelated entity. When items of significant cultural value are classified as 'belonging to the world,' they end up being "'administered' by organizations with financial power."[66] The risk, Kynourgiopoulou says, is that this rhetoric of global equality leads to the revival of colonial ideas and a disregard for other cultures.[67] The former director of the British Museum, David Wilson, embodies this danger. In 1985, he explained how Greece, as a 'Third World Country,' could not safely house the Parthenon Marbles, and argued that the Greeks were really just an 'ex-colonial' group attempting to establish a national identity for themselves.[68] Yet, Greece was never a British colony, and the colonial ideology imbued in this statement is especially concerning: Wilson's positioning of Britain as superior to Greece stemmed, at least partly, from his views about Greece's inferiority at the time of his writing (the mid-1980s), a period not far removed from the modern day. Echoing Wilson some twenty years later, MacGregor declared that "[o]nly here [in the British Museum] can the worldwide significance of the Parthenon sculptures be fully grasped."[69] The insinuation in MacGregor's words is that "the British Museum sees Greece as a country of lesser significance than Britain and with less museological sophistication," a viewpoint that parallels the British Museum's nineteenth and twentieth century claims that Britain equalled civilization *par excellence*, ushering colonial reasoning into the twenty-first century. As well, the British Museum's guide on the Parthenon Marbles, published in the 2000s, does not name any individual or group; "the collection, display and interpretation of the [Parthenon Marbles] is carried out without direct recourse to the people who created [them]."

[66] Kynourgiopoulou, "National Identity Interrupted: The Mutilation of the Parthenon Marbles and the Greek Claim for Repatriation," 160.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect it (1st ed.)*, 26.

This allows the British Museum to distance these ancient Greek sculptures from the creators and thus "weaken the bond both to their precise origins and the ownership claims that might arise from them."[70] These examples further demonstrate how Britain, through the British Museum, continues to overwrite non-British cultural histories, a starkly colonial idea, while promoting its own superiority.

Isabel Hilton, in a commentary published in a 1997 edition of *The Guardian*, wrote of the Labour Party's recent decision to keep the Parthenon Marbles in Britain, going against public expectation and opinion. She recorded the Minister of Culture's claim that the Parthenon Marbles were a fundamental part of the British Museum, and that it was not feasible nor sensible to return them to their country of origin.[71] This assertion, Hilton believed, was the equivalent of saying that "Hong Kong was an integral part of Britain's collection of colonies;" this was true in the past, but not in 1997, and was not what one would expect the labour government to promote.[72] Hilton's discussion shows that the paternalistic reasoning used by the British Museum is not limited to this institution, and like MacGregor and Wilson's claims, has carried over into the modern period from an imperialist past. However, the British Museum's claim over the Parthenon Marbles has become a position that is increasingly at odds with the British population at large. A 1996 public opinion poll done by the Channel 4 television channel in Britain reported that ninety percent of those polled were in favour of restoring the Parthenon Marbles to Greece. Polls carried out by Market & Opinion Research International, Ltd (MORI) in the late 1990s and early 2000s, also demonstrated increased public support for the return of the Parthenon Marbles.[73] While a separate survey done in 2002 showed that under fifty percent of people in

[70] Hughes, "The British Museum in Print," 199-200.
[71] Isabel Hilton, "Time to make Greeks a gift of their Marbles," *The Guardian*, July 16, 1997, B17.
[72] Hilton, "Time to make Greeks a gift of their Marbles," B17.
[73] Kynourgiopoulou, "National Identity Interrupted: The Mutilation of the Parthenon Marbles and the Greek Claim for Repatriation," 167.

Britain believed the Parthenon Marbles should be restored, this number increased to over seventy-five percent in 2003.[74]

In the hopes of having the Parthenon Marbles returned in time for the 2004 Summer Olympics hosted by Athens, Greece launched a campaign that was supported by British politicians, former Olympic athletes, scholars, and nearly ninety percent of museum staff around Britain.[75] Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum at the time, did not follow this consensus, instead maintaining the museum's hold of the Parthenon Marbles.[76] This public dissension illustrates that although the British Museum may promote a certain type of identity, by the turn of the twenty-first century, a large proportion of the British population no longer agreed with the museum's image of their country. This demonstrates that the Parthenon Marbles are no longer ingrained in British national identity, and are instead only a part of the identity of the British Museum. The British Museum refers to the Parthenon Marbles as 'ours.'[77] This designation of British control is emphasized by the fact the museum is legally required to refer to these sculptures as the 'Elgin Marbles,' a label which promotes the sculptures' perceived Britishness.[78] In light of the British public's stance about the Parthenon Marbles, it becomes obvious that this 'our' refers to a very specific group: a certain academic and museological elite.[79] Thus, while the British Museum reinforces an identity of cultural primacy, with the assistance of the Parthenon Marbles, this identity is one which the general British populace no

[74] Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect it (1st ed.)*, 36.
[75] Ibid. 41.
[76] "Culture Clash," *Art & Antiques*, March 2003, http://www.elginism.com/elgin-marbles/neil-macgregor-answers-questions-about-the-parthenon-marbles/20030321/4521/.
[77] Ibid. 34.
[78] Kynourgiopoulou, "National Identity Interrupted: The Mutilation of the Parthenon Marbles and the Greek Claim for Repatriation," 158.
[79] Ibid. 159.

longer accepts; instead, Britons are calling for the Parthenon Marbles' return to Greece, and thus rejecting the British identity which comes with these objects of Greek cultural heritage.

Even after Britain's imperial dominion collapsed, British museums did little to acknowledge this difficult history and their ties to it. Throughout the 1950s and the years following, British museums rarely touched upon slavery or empire; if they did, they would generally glorify the empire, downplay the negative legacy of colonialism, or focus primarily on the material culture imperial conquest had contributed to their collections.[80] In doing so, history is rewritten, ignoring the fact that many items in the British Museum's foundational collection were from, or made possible by, the slave trade. While in Jamaica, Sir Hans Sloane collected musical instruments played by slaves, whips and nooses used to torture slaves, and skin samples of slaves. A large portion of the specimen samples Sloane gathered were obtained through direct contact with slaves. Sloane used a slave man who ended up in London, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, to translate the Arabic inscriptions on pendants in his collection.[81] Further, Sloane was well connected to people in the South Sea Company, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the East India Company, and received many of his South and East Asia natural specimens from travellers to these areas, all of which are tangible examples of the important function of Empire in Sloane's collecting career.[82] Imperialism and colonialism played a major role in the history of the British Museum, reaching back to its inception.

The British Museum's limited acknowledgement of its past associations with imperialism and colonialism continues into the twenty-first century. The museum's Souvenir Guide from the 2000s makes no reference to the British Empire, while their Family Guide does

[80] Stephen Small, "Slavery, Colonialism and Museums Representations in Great Britain: Old and New Circuits of Migration," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 9 (2011): 118.
[81] Delbourgo, "Slavery, Empire, and the Cabinet of Curiosities: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum."
[82] Ibid.

discuss the empire, but mainly in a positive manner, emphasizing how "[t]he power of the British empire [allowed] traders, explorers, scientists, generals and admirals [to bring] to the museum all sorts of objects for the scholars to study."[83] This decision maintains a strong association between the British Museum and a tradition of colonialist enterprise, a generally negative affiliation for the modern museum-goer.[84] In a 2018 interview, the current director of the museum, Hartwig Fischer, acknowledges that his institution is intrinsically linked to an imperial British past, and that going forward the museum must be open about this history.[85] This is an example of how the universalist message of the British Museum can work to better include in its narrative the stories and identities of other, non-British people, without devaluing them in an explicit or implicit manner. While the British Museum in the twenty-first century looks to serve the entire world, as an institution it still "colluded, both unknowingly and knowingly, in damaging human communities and cultural identities through its acquisition of objects."[86] Acknowledging this fact in an active way for the British Museum to move beyond, while still engaging with, the complex identities it has promoted over the past two centuries.

The British Museum informed a particular kind of British identity, tied to colonialism and imperialism, that positioned Britain as the final destination in humanity's so-called advance in civilization.[87] Through its vast collection of pieces taken from throughout the British Empire, the British Museum bolstered ideas of British power and superiority. Indeed, a national identity centred around British cultural superiority is one of the main ideas the British Museum enforced,

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[83] Hughes, "The British Museum in Print," 199.
[84] Stuart Frost, "'A Bastion of Colonialism' Public Perceptions of the British Museum and its Relationship to Empire," *Third Text,* Vol 33, no 4-5 (2019): 489, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1653075.
[85] Charlotte Higgins, "British Museum Director Hartwig Fischer: 'There are no foreigners here-the museum is a world country' (Interview)," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/apr/13/british-museum-director-hartwig-fischer-there-are-no-foreigners-here-the-museum-is-a-world-country.
[86] Challis, "The Parthenon Sculptures: Emblems of British National Identity," 33.
[87] Shelley, *The British Museum*, 325.

and in some ways continues to enforce today, through museological discourse, physical representations, and official statements. Parts of the British Museum during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were organized in such a manner as to lead British citizens to see themselves as the culmination of society. While this organizing principle no longer exists today, the pediment sculpture of the museum remains a physical manifestation of the theme of the progress of civilization, ensuring the British Museum still acts as a reminder of (presumed) British superiority. Comments made by directors of the museum about the museum and the items of cultural heritage it houses, notably the Parthenon Marbles, also foster a sense of cultural superiority. The British Museum, and thus Britain, is promoted as the best place in the world for pieces like the Parthenon Marbles, a notion which minimizes the importance of other countries and cultures, such as Greece and Greek culture. While the British Museum has begun to examine its past connections to imperialism and colonialism, the museum's refusal to return emblems of other nations' cultural heritage ensures that it remains attached to its imperial and colonial history and continues to project a problematic image of British superiority.

Appendix A

Figure 1. Jaris Darwin. *British Museum Pediment Sculpture*. Photographed February 19, 2019. London, England.

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