We Want Our Stuff Back:

A Look at Art Imperialism

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Cultural history inquiries can benefit by using a world historical lens to view and interpret sources and events. By widening both the geographical and chronological boundaries, this global vision reveals patterns and trends that might remain hidden under a more focused inquiry. A world historical perspective can also highlight the various ‘centrism’ at play—the biases, attitudes, and prejudices embedded within the history and the historian. One topic ripe for a world historical treatment is art imperialism. Defining art imperialism proves challenging and potentially unwieldy. Generally, art imperialism includes any interaction between a stronger, more forceful power and a weaker, perhaps less autonomous entity regarding the art, architecture, and archaeological remains of the weaker entity. Typically, this interaction occurs between empires/nation states and colonial lands, hereinafter called the source nation. In some instances, the artifacts and monuments of the source nation are simply destroyed by the empire; in others, there may be an acknowledged agreement of exchange between the two parties, albeit possibly resulting from pressure, persuasion, or intimidation exerted by the empire. In still other cases, empires acquire artifacts from source nations by various means, and the newly acquired art takes on some new role within the empire.

For purposes herein, this paper focuses primarily on two specific types of acquisition: items taken by imperial aggression or individual opportunism on behalf of the empire. These items are not destroyed, distributed, or, in the case of metalwork, melted down for monetary value; instead, these items are reused and redisplayed within the empire and, thereby, integrated into the cultural heritage of the empire. However, the source nation does not willingly proffer these items and may make numerous appeals for restitution of items wrongfully taken. Therein lies the heart of the cultural property debate within art imperialism—both sides want the item.

Traditionally, art imperialism has been considered a modern problem. In the pre-modern world, before 1500 AD, aggressive art acquisition and opportunism were called by alternative
names—plunder, loot, spoils—though these names are still used when offering negative comments on modern art imperialism. John Henry Merryman allows that the Age of Imperialism began with Rome and continued through the mid-20th century, although he limits his listing of empires to only those in Western civilization. This seems rather restrictive since wherever and whenever there is an empire some form of art imperialism usually follows since art serves as a varied and powerful tool for the empire. Herein, perhaps, the first centrism appears in that much of the traditional Western historiography on art imperialism tends to focus on specific cases between Western empires and colonial source nations. While there may be calls for a global treatment of art imperialism, much Western scholarship is concerned with the imperial acquisitions by Britain, France, Germany and the United States, while tending to overlook non-Western empires such as Japan or China. Since much of the current historiography focuses on the actions of Western European empires that modeled themselves on empires of the classical world, perhaps it is beneficial to look at a paradigm established in the past in order to shed light on the global present.

Currently, the debate surrounding the ownership of cultural property taken via art imperialism focuses too much on ownership—who has it, who wants it back, and what restitution would mean not just for a specific item but for all items imperially acquired. Instead of deciphering the international legal codes or evaluating the morality of past actions—both important aspects of the debate—this paper aims to investigate what it means to take and possess, as well as what it means to have lost and to want back, as a means of prizing out the centrisms embedded within the Western scholarship on the topic. Further, this paper argues that art imperialism is not just the initial act of taking someone else’s stuff, but includes the continued

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possession of the art and the concomitant refusal to return the art to the source nation; as such, though modern empires have declined, their progeny continue to exert an imperial hegemony through the stranglehold of possession by Western museums. The geographic constraints of this paper are primarily focused on European empires, and the source nations from which they acquired art; while there is a definite need for a global treatment, a thorough investigation within the European tradition where this author is more familiar will allow for a typology to be created that can later be applied in investigating non-Western empires. Chronologically, examples of art imperialism from both the modern and pre-modern periods are examined. I begin with a general look at the cultural property ownership debate with specific regard to the Elgin/Parthenon marbles issue as an example for the larger modern context in order to establish some key points related to modern art imperialism. Then, I will examine art imperialism as perpetrated by ancient Rome and its successors in order to suggest the origins and past practices of art imperialism. Finally, I conclude with some comments about what is missing from the current debate. By the conclusion, this paper will evidence a warped centrism with regard to who can and cannot possess stuff, and the double-standard contained within museum-building.

One of the more prominent and publicized cases within the world-wide cultural property debate is that of the marble sculptures, frieze blocks, and metopes taken from the Acropolis in Athens by Lord Elgin in 1801. The nutshell version of the story follows that in his position as Ambassador for the British Empire to Constantinople, Lord Elgin applied for and received a permit from the Ottoman government, then the overlords of Greece, to draw and take impressions of the sculptures on the Parthenon in Athens. Elgin, however, did more than make

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3 Exploring art imperialism in non-Western empires is outside the scope of this paper.
4 Merryman’s terminology in referring to the marbles housed in the British Museum as the “Elgin marbles,” with the remaining Parthenon sculptures in Athens called the “Parthenon marbles” is utilized throughout this paper. See Merryman, “Whither the Elgin Marbles,” in Imperialism, Art and Restitution, ed John Henry Merryman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 98note.
replicas—he removed approximately half of the sculptured marble from the Parthenon and shipped them back to England. A few years later, when he was facing dire financial straits, Elgin sold the marbles to the British government, who installed the marbles at the British Museum where they have been on display since 1817. While Merryman suggests that Elgin’s acquisition of the marbles was an example of art acquired through opportunism, Elgin’s position as a government official proves problematic. His connection to the British Empire allowed Elgin to exert influence over the Ottoman Empire and the provincial Greeks in Athens that an independent opportunist may not have had. Further, the subsequent sale of the marbles from Elgin to the British government, which transferred possession and ownership from an individual to an empire, perhaps orients this case more towards imperial acquisition. The British government could have just as easily not purchased the marbles, yet they did for reasons that will be discussed later. Consequently, modern Greeks are not negotiating with Elgin’s heirs for restitution, but, rather with the British government.

Questions of ownership arose practically from the minute the Elgin marbles were removed from the ancient temple. Elgin’s permit did not explicitly state that items could be removed, so did Elgin commit an outright theft or just a sly interpretation of the permit? Does the modern Greek state have any recourse since they were not an independent and autonomous nation at the time, but rather a colony under Ottoman control? The British government’s purchase of the marbles appears legal, but were they, in a sense, buying looted antiquities from a below-board art dealer? Greece has always wanted the marbles back; England wants to keep them. Both sides attach importance to the marbles and connect possession of the marbles to their own national identities. For Greece, William St. Clair observes, “from the moment it was

conceived in the fifth century BC, the Periclean Parthenon was a monument to imperialism…it asserted the identity of the people of Athens.”7 Losing these pieces of their cultural identity emphasizes how much modern Greece differs from its ancestors; though considered the founder of Western civilization and occupying land within the boundaries that define Europe, years of occupation of Greece by non-Westerners separated this ancient land from the Western mindset. For the British, the marbles can be seen as part of the Western patrimony and provide an integral link between the present and the past. Merryman notes that after two hundred years on British soil the Elgin marbles have become a part of British cultural heritage as much as any piece of native culture.8 St. Clair suggests, “The Elgin Marbles played a role in the legitimating narrative of empire,”9 that Britain was the next great power in a hereditary line of powerful civilizations dating back to antiquity and Imperial Athens. Returning the marbles would, in effect, cause a break in this hereditary line while acknowledging the decline of their once great empire; with the marbles gone, Britain would be left with only a memory of past greatness.

Within the larger context of the restitution debate, the question of national identity looms large. In trying to absolve past actions, modern nations argue that different rules and conventions were at play when predecessor empires were competing for supremacy. Seizing art and artifacts from colonial lands proved to be a method for exerting power within the source nation, though this was hidden behind the twin veils of rescue and humanism. At first blush, rescue, along with preservation and study, suggests an altruistic motivation, though a closer look reveals an embedded sense of superiority. Wendy M.K. Shaw notes,

Many protectionist arguments depended on the perceived inability of non-European races to appreciate and protect the arts of antiquity…Europeans often perceived the practice of collection from non-European territories as transferring

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9 St. Clair, 81.
antiquities from barbaric hands that presumably neglected and even destroyed them into the hands of scholars who coddled, studied, and preserved them.\textsuperscript{10}

Though the Parthenon was Greek, Greece had been overrun by the eastern Ottomans, which left this sacred building open to potential damage and destruction at the hands of rulers who seemingly disregarded the ancient monument.\textsuperscript{11} The rescue argument surfaced as a way to combat the negative press attached to Lord Elgin’s actions. As St. Clair comments, Elgin’s removal of the marbles was framed as a rescue: the marbles “had been saved from chaos and barbarism and were being carefully looked after by an imperial protecting power that had their best interest at heart.”\textsuperscript{12} Claims that the Elgin marbles are better protected and housed in the British Museum, particularly since a comparable museum space in Athens was absent, continue to swirl; however, the opening of the New Acropolis Museum in Athens in 2009 seems to have dampened this argument a bit. Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt and the subsequent French involvement in Egypt offers another example of superiority underlying rescue. Sharon Waxman offers that to the French, the “Egyptians were considered too primitive to study such a sophisticated science. The French dominated Egypt’s archaeological institutions for the better part of a century, fending off other Europeans and giving no thought whatever to including Egyptians.”\textsuperscript{13} Seizing art allowed for a simultaneous degradation of the ‘barbarian-other’ while elevating the self-image of the empire, with each subsequent act of acquisition reaffirming both sentiments.

Rescued antiquities needed a place to be stored and displayed and the galleries of modern universal museums soon amassed wonders brought back from a far. While not negating the

\textsuperscript{10} Wendy M.K. Shaw, Possessors and Possessed—Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 37-38.

\textsuperscript{11} The Ottomans stored gunpowder within the Parthenon at one point in time, though, curiously, it was a Venetian bomb in 1687 that ignited the gunpowder into a fire which destroyed a large section of the south side of the temple. See Waxman, 226.

\textsuperscript{12} St. Clair, 80-81.

\textsuperscript{13} Waxman, 57.
educational benefits of museums, the power of empire underpins the formation of many of the world’s greatest museums. The geographical footprint of the empire allowed universal museums, such as the British Museum and the Louvre, to acquire art and artifacts from the furthest reaches of the world. While this practice reflects the sensibilities of the European Enlightenment, Waxman contends, “In coming to the Louvre to view the art of the world in a universal museum, gathering all the great artistic achievements of humankind, you pay homage to the supremacy of this glorious museum and the culture that created it.”¹⁴ The glories of the empire could be displayed for the public’s benefit and the empire’s extensive colonial holdings could be admired. Imperial competition for art parallels imperial competition for land. In discussing the removal of antiquities from Egypt by European empires, archaeologist Betsy Bryan acknowledges the ramifications for the colonies: “It wakens people to the simple message of what the nationalist competition of the nineteenth century ended up doing. As it created the great museums in the West, it created a strange, odd blank in Egypt and other countries…This nationalist competition by European powers was about getting the biggest, most noticeable stuff (emphasis added).”¹⁵ Acquisition swelled the coffers of the universal museums, as well as inflating national pride.

Acquisition is just one side of the cultural property debate, the other side being the actual restitution of items imperially acquired. In his Introduction to *Imperialism, Art, and Restitution*, Merryman outlines various means of acquisition (aggression, opportunism, partage, and accretion), as well as guiding principles for evaluating the return of items. These principles include nationalism, legality, morality, and cultural property internationalism. Cries for nationalism, which “implies the attribution of national character to cultural objects,

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¹⁴ Waxman, 67.
¹⁵ Qtd in Waxman, 25.
independently of their location or ownership,” and internationalism, that cultural property
belongs to everyone,\textsuperscript{16} seem most appropriate as counter-arguments for imperial aggression.
However, in the post-colonial period, the former empires proffer cultural property
internationalism as a rationale for keeping stuff, while the source nations claim their national
identity is diminished as a result of the lost property. What is particularly interesting is how
these two principles are applied in that nation/empire building was a motivating factor two
hundred years ago that prompted the aggressive acquisition in the first place. Now, source
nations are rebuked for their appeals to nationalism while the former empires tout the idea that
cultural property belongs to all of mankind not just individual nations. For example, Merryman
completely disregards the importance of the Elgin marbles for the national identity of Greece by
concluding that national pride is not really at stake since there are so many other marbles in
Greece with which to identify.\textsuperscript{17} Returning acquired art would mean relinquishing the last
vestiges of empire and potentially opening up universal museums to the depletion of their
collections.

Identity is at the center of the dilemma though it is frequently downplayed, particularly
on the side of the empire. While the modern world has elevated this debate to being one of
universal and altruistic motivations as a means of differentiating it from the supposed rampant
plunder so common to the pre-modern world, the issue of national or imperial identity through
art was evident in classical antiquity. Since Western civilization claims inheritance from the
classical world, a look at how the Roman Empire constructed its imperial identity through the
aggressive acquisition of art will prove instructive.

\textsuperscript{16} Merryman, “Introduction,” 10, 12.
\textsuperscript{17} Merryman, “Whither,” 102-103.
In 70 BC, Marcus Tullius Cicero prosecuted Gaius Verres at the extortion court in Rome. After three years suffering under the governorship of Verres, the Sicilians reached their breaking point, decided to sue the profligate governor, and requested that Cicero represent them in their case. In addition to extorting money, Verres was accused of stealing marble and bronze statuary, metalwork, jewelry, and icons from personal and public collections, including items sanctified in temples, throughout Sicily. Though Cicero needed only his opening remarks in court to prove the defendant guilty, his meticulous preparation warranted the publication of two speeches titled *Against Verres*. These speeches exemplify Roman rhetoric at its best, which accounts for its longevity.  

Cicero goes into great detail documenting the chronic theft perpetrated by Verres in his various positions in the Roman government and throughout the Roman provinces. The audience learns that Verres’ crimes against the Sicilians are not an isolated event, but the tipping point for a man whose unbridled lust and greed for material wealth finally prompted a legal action. In the course of his prosecutorial wordplay, Cicero offers us a glimpse into meanings associated with art and memorials in the Roman world.

Cicero makes a clear distinction between private and public art. One of the complaints against Verres’ crimes is that he stole public memorials for his own personal use. Plunder of an enemy’s art seems to be allowed so long as it is used for public Roman glory. Cicero says to Verres,

You visited these allied and friendly cities with the rights and rank of assistant governor; but had you forcibly invaded them as general at the head of an army, even so, any statuary or works of art that you might take away from them you were surely bound to transport, not to your own town house or the suburban estates of your friends, but to Rome for the benefit of the nation.

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18 In chapter 5 of *Art as Plunder*, Margaret Miles traces the Verrines speeches down through the era of the Grand Tour and suggests that it was the familiarity with this document that encouraged elite Europeans to criticize Lord Elgin as a plunderer in the Verres model.

Plunder taken from a defeated enemy during wartime was assumed, and should be set up in a public area “where the eyes of the nation may rest upon it every day.”

Public war art helped to identify the Roman Empire by the various peoples it had conquered; strolling through the public spaces of Roman cities, one could see the universal spread of the Empire. Further, seeing this art every day would have repeatedly instilled a sense of supremacy within the Roman populace. Verres taking this art for his personal use in effect denies the Romans some of the joys of conquest.

Even more egregious is Verres’ theft of memorials previously displayed in honor of Roman victory. In the aftermath of the Punic Wars, Scipio Africanus awarded the Sicilian town of Tyndaris with a beautiful and beloved statue of Mercury, which Verres stole after threatening the citizens. Of this example, Cicero explains,

> I may charge him with extorting money, for he has robbed our allies of a statue worth much money; with public embezzlement, for he has not scrupled to carry off a statue that belonged to the Roman nation, was part of the plunder taken from Rome’s enemies, and was erected by the authority of a Roman general; with treason, for he has dared to pull down and remove from the country a memorial of our country’s power and fame and triumphs.

By stealing this monument, Verres was stealing the identity of Rome. What had once been an enemy statue had been converted into a victory monument that represented the imperial might of Rome, thereby entering into the cultural heritage of Rome. Losing the statue was a loss of power for Rome.

Verres’ plunder also fractured the identity of the source nation. Sicily maintained a valued position within the Roman provinces since the island was “the first of all foreign nations to become the loyal friend of Rome.” Being a Roman ally conferred certain privileges, among them legal retribution when wronged. Cicero was very much aware of this and acknowledges

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20 Cicero *Verr.* 2.1.129.
21 Cicero *Verr.* 2.4.88.
22 Cicero *Verr.* 2.2.2.
that “the eyes of the world are upon us” to see how Rome will deal with one of its own who had abused and mistreated Roman allies and citizens.23 The inability of the Roman government to act in this matter would have reduced Sicily’s identity as an ally to that of a mere subjugated state. In yet another example of Verres’ rampant plunder of Sicily, this time of a statue of Apollo from the temple of Asclepius in Agrigentum, Cicero reports, “the community was grievously distressed: they felt the loss of so many things at once – Scipio’s benefaction, their own religious peace of mind, their city’s art treasure, the record of our victory, the evidence for their alliance with Rome.”24 Loss of the statue voided any public acknowledgement of Agrigentum’s association with Rome; without this, Rome could have gone back on their word at any time, leaving Sicily to fend for itself in a hostile world. Of further insult to the Sicilians, Cicero condemns Verres’ arrogance in his treatment of fellow Roman citizens as inferior; in a telling remark, Cicero says “this is as good as saying, ‘You are not worthy to have such works of arts; they are fit only for people in my high position’.”25 Though Rome conquered Sicily, Rome did not reduce the island to a colonial servant but garnered allegiance with their respectful treatment.

It is important to remember that Roman monuments were not just the spoils of war. Though the argument could be made that a great deal of loot or booty was collected to line the pockets of legionnaire and general alike, art and monuments became a visual record of the history of the empire. Margaret M. Miles notes that “captured art brought into the city served as a convenient symbol for foreign territories brought under Roman governance.”26 Conferring honor and glory on the conquering general and city, public monuments encouraged others to greatness and provided reminders of past marvelous deeds. For the Sicilians, who were a party

23 Cicero *Verr.* 1.1.46.  
24 Cicero *Verr.* 2.4.93.  
25 Cicero *Verr.* 2.4.45.  
26 Miles, 61.
to the early days of empire, treatment of the island by Rome contains a paradox. On the one hand, spoils from the Roman conquest of Syracuse are credited with bringing the beauty of Greek art to the attention of the Roman elite, thereby inciting the desire for art acquisition and precipitating further aggressive acquisition and competition among this stratum of society. On the other hand, as Miles suggests, plundered art was used for dedications elsewhere and helped to create the imperial identity.\footnote{Miles, 74.} However, Cicero points out that many of the Punic War generals had a history of open magnanimity towards Sicily. Though Marcellus did bring back plunder to Rome, he did not strip Syracuse of all its art. Of Marcellus, Cicero writes,

> he took the view that it would not tend to the credit of Rome that he should blot out and destroy all this beauty….he therefore spared all its buildings, public and private, sacred and secular, as completely as if he had come with his army to defend it, instead of assault it. In dealing with the city’s treasures he did not forget either that he was a conqueror or that he was a humane man.\footnote{Cicero \textit{Verr.} 2.4.120.}

Cicero credits Publius Servilius with the proper form of taking enemy plunder for “he brought it home to his countrymen, displayed them in his triumphal procession, and had them entered in full in the official catalogue of the public Treasury….\textquote[as] the property of the nation.”\footnote{Cicero \textit{Verr.} 2.1.57.} In an unprecedented move after the Third Punic War, Scipio Africanus went so far as to reclaim plunder stolen by the Carthaginians; instead of sending the items back to Rome as was his right, Scipio returned items to the Sicilian town of Himera. Scipio “saw to it that restitution was made, so far as might be” and Cicero confirms that as the Sicilians “watched their ancestral treasures being set up in their town, they felt themselves beginning to regain the prosperity and importance enjoyed by their forefathers.”\footnote{Cicero \textit{Verr.} 2.2.86.} Scipio achieved a double honor with this generosity, for his

\footnote{Cicero \textit{Verr.} 2.2.86.}
name was inscribed on the new bases of the returned statues, thereby memorializing the victory, the alliance, and the gift.

As more and more land was conquered, winning generals continued to bring back art to Rome. The transition from the waning Republic to the early Empire saw created displays of art such as Pompey’s theatre, Julius Caesar’s many public works, and Augustus’ transfer of Egyptian obelisks to Rome. Miles notes that a commonality of these ventures is the emphasis on public venues for the viewing of imperial art acquired from conquered enemies. She goes on to suggest that Vespasian’s “Temple of Peace and its surrounding complex contained the first example of a museum-like display that offered ‘universal coverage’,” a predecessor of sorts to the universal museum of the nineteenth-century. Though there might have been a conscious choice to create public memorials, generals and emperors were still taking other people’s art in order to augment the imperial identity. This became the precedent from which subsequent European empires would follow. Miles declares, “True sophistication in the urban expression of power through art and architecture is one of Rome’s great achievements that set the archetype for western capitals.” If so, it should not be surprising that subsequent emperors followed the same path in creating identity for their imperial cities.

However, with Constantine’s creation of the new eastern Roman capital in the former Byzantium, importance was placed on taking already established markers of Roman imperial identity and relocating them to new environments; the antiquity of the relocated items established legitimacy for the new city. Constantine’s relocation of numerous statues and monuments from Rome and other cities in the Empire to Constantinople proved meaningful, for, as Sarah Guberti Bassett notes, “What was implied in this visual metaphor was the transferral of

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31 Miles, 96.
32 Miles, 262.
33 Miles, 86.
power from the old city to the new. Constantinople was, in effect, describing itself as the New Rome.”\textsuperscript{34} A bronze grouping of four horses, a \textit{quadriga} for a chariot placed on the top of a triumphal arch, is one example of items relocated. A pattern established with this one monument indicates the prevalence of art imperialism in the following centuries: this grouping was originally somewhere within the Roman Empire, perhaps Rome, and moved to Constantinople; during the Fourth Crusade, the Venetians captured Constantinople and took the \textit{quadriga} back to Venice, where it was mounted on St. Mark’s Basilica; during Napoleon’s march through Italy, he took the \textit{quadriga} back to Paris, only to have it repatriated back to Venice after his defeat.\textsuperscript{35}

Other emperors and empires followed suit: Ostrogoth King Theoderic had columns from Rome relocated to Ravenna; Charlemagne had items from Ravenna and Rome moved to his capital of Aachen.\textsuperscript{36} The acquisition of statues and monuments of a former empire by a new empire connotes a double-layer of identity; legitimacy is established by the actual acquisition and the continued possession of art, as well as the symbolic meaning already attached to the item.

The parallels of aggressive art acquisition between ancient Rome and modern empires are telling. Both took art to confer glory upon the empire. Erecting public buildings and monuments throughout the Roman Empire to display acquired spoils has a modern incarnation in the creation of universal museums within the important cities of the imperial nations. Keeping the spoils allowed the disparate Roman nation to coalesce; modern claims of universal patrimony suggest a similar global connection among peoples. The main difference, however, is in relation to the source nation. Rome saw the benefit of leaving some art within the conquered lands, and though


\textsuperscript{35} The resources are a little cloudy on if the \textit{quadriga} moved to the Hippodrome is the same \textit{quadriga} taken by the Venetians. See Bassett, n20.

self-serving motives can be seen behind this, Cicero noted the importance of art for the morale of the conquered people. While the modern world has vacillated on its reaction to aggressive art imperialism and the restitution of specific items based on feelings to how the art was acquired, the argument for the importance of the art to the source nation’s identity fades into the background behind the much louder cry of cultural property internationalism.

In the last few decades, many former colonial or conquered lands have sought restitution of items seized by imperial aggressors, though by far, the moist boisterous and publicity generating cries have come from Greece and Egypt. Since his appointment in 2002 as Secretary General to the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, Dr. Zahi Hawass advocates for the return of all Egyptian antiquities housed in Western museums. Specifically targeted for return are the Rosetta Stone, in the British Museum, and a bust of Queen Nefertiti in the Berlin Museum; the former, taken during Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, then arriving in Britain as part of the treaty with France, the later in Germany as their half of partage from archaeological excavations. While Egypt wants them back, the Western museums claim ownership; housed at the entrance to the West wing of ancient civilizations, the Rosetta Stone connects numerous ancient cultures and exemplifies British Museum Director Neil MacGregor’s redesign of the museum to focus on universality. The long and tortured road to the creation of the New Acropolis Museum in Athens brought repeated appeals for the return of the Elgin marbles to Greece. The argument that the British Museum is a better caretaker than Greece seems to

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37 Much has been written about the abhorrence of the art plunder by Nazi Germany. Consequently, since the war years, there have been extensive efforts made to locate and return stolen art. However, Imperial Japan’s plunder of their Korean colonies in the years leading up to WWII has gone virtually unnoticed in the West. For some scant information about this understudied topic, see Donald MacIntyre, “A Legacy Lost,” *Time*, February 27, 2004; Ah-young Chung, “Book Arouses Return of Looted Relics,” *Korea Times*, April 10, 2009.
38 Statues Napoleon took from Italy were returned, though Egyptian items remained in the hands of an empire—yet another curiosity within this topic.
weaken with the “$200 million, 226,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art rebuttal to Britain’s argument.”

It is not coincidental that the recent calls for restitution from Greece and Egypt coincide with the development of new national museums within those countries. Egypt has an aggressive business plan to open dozens of new museums and attractions over the next three years, including the proposed Grand Museum in Giza, and the white plaster casts of the missing Parthenon marbles on the third floor of the New Acropolis Museum would quickly be removed should the ancient originals be returned. The impact of returned artifacts on the citizens of Greece and Egypt remains a mystery. Questions about restitution and items acquired imperially cannot be resolved easily or quickly; however, the double-standard needs to be acknowledged. Empires cannot acquire art to support their own national inklings, keep it, and refuse to give it back by dismissing the argument for nationalism on the part of the source nation. As such, Western museums continue to exert imperial force behind the claims of global patrimony. The 2003 Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums, signed by numerous European and American museums, stands firmly rooted in the mentality that they “serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation,” and that “to narrow the focus of museums whose collections are diverse and multifaceted would therefore be a disservice to all visitors.” The British Museum continues to cite the universal mission of the museum as reason for retaining the marbles. Recent journalistic rhetoric claims that “the marbles, really, belong

to everyone,“44 and “we’re all custodians of global culture for posterity. Neither today’s Greeks nor Britons own the Parthenon marbles, really.”45 If this sentiment were true, there would be no argument over where the marbles lived. Perhaps the best solution would be for all the Parthenon marbles to be relocated to a neutral site, neither Greek nor British, as a way to highlight the international patrimony. The Parthenon replica in Nashville, Tennessee might be an ideal location.

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