THE PARTHENON

ELGIN MARBLE MEDALS

Fig. 1. Seated Male Nude from the Elgin Marbles; reverse: Royal Seal of George IV. (Source: Harvard Art Museums)

Fig. 2. Figure D, Eastern Pediment of the Parthenon, at the British Museum. (Source: https://www.worldhistory.org/image/3319/dionysos-from-the-parthenon/)

Between 1819 and 1823, Edward Thomason manufactured a series of tokens known as the Elgin Marble Medals. Each token reflected a different sculptural segment of the famed friezes, with the obverse of each coin depicting the royal seal of King George IV. These tokens were material testaments to the British government's support of Lord Elgin's controversial acquisition of the Elgin Marbles— a varied grouping of iconic Classical Greek sculptures that adorned the

Parthenon in Athens's Acropolis. The featured segments of the Elgin Marbles that Thomason reflected in the series of medals include equestrian figures, lapiths and centaurs, figures from Hyperion's chariot, sacrifices of domesticated farm animals, and nude Classical renditions of both men and women (Fig. 2). The medals are 4.8 centimeters in diameter, uniform in their size and weight, and they were all struck from bronze. The Harvard Art Museums houses 48 of these works by Thomason (Fig. 1), a collection reflecting the legacy of transferable, material objects and the parallels that exist between international cultural disputes that we face today, and those that global communities have been facing for centuries.

Fig. 3. Reverse (Left): Royal Seal of George IV; Temple of Minerva at Athens, or Parthenon (Right). (Source: Heritage Auctions)

Born in 1769, Edward Thomason's upbringing was largely intertwined with the functional and material culture of Birmingham, where he lived and worked as a silversmith, inventor, and son of a well-known buckle manufacturer. Following the retirement of his father in 1793, Thomason used his familiarity with metal-working to begin to manufacture gilt and plated buttons, which eventually developed into the production of bronze, silver, and gold tokens and medals. Working in buttons and tokens of bronze in addition to gold and silver meant Thomason's work was likely accessible and recognized by the masses, as well as consistently exchanged amongst communities.

The importance of Thomason's Elgin Medals stems from the ability each token has to issue commentary on the British government's perspective on repatriation in the early 19th-century, and in the 21st century as well. Thomason's tokens create an interesting and tangible dialogue between the cultural and iconic influence of Classical Greek archaeology in Western history, and the validity of an imperialist government's shaky claim over structures that were never rightfully transferred from one place to another. It is imperative that curators and defenders of world heritage look for objects that can visually articulate the long-standing disputes between imperialist states and organizations protected by their borders, and the regions from where these irreplaceable antiquities continue to be kidnapped from. The stagnant presence of the royal seal of King George IV is telling of the British government's unapologetic embrace of their newly acquired testament to the ancient West. The function behind these medals, combined with the detail they were meticulously crafted with and the moment in time during which they were struck, is an excellent way to demonstrate the role those visual artists and craftsmen play in the widespread dissemination of propaganda that transcends the expected and traditional format of a mural, or a mass-printed poster. Each of these medals was struck with the intention of igniting a tactile experience that would allow the individual handling it to make the connection between the iconic classical forms of the Elgin Marbles and the Parthenon in its entirety, and the British Crown (Fig. 3).

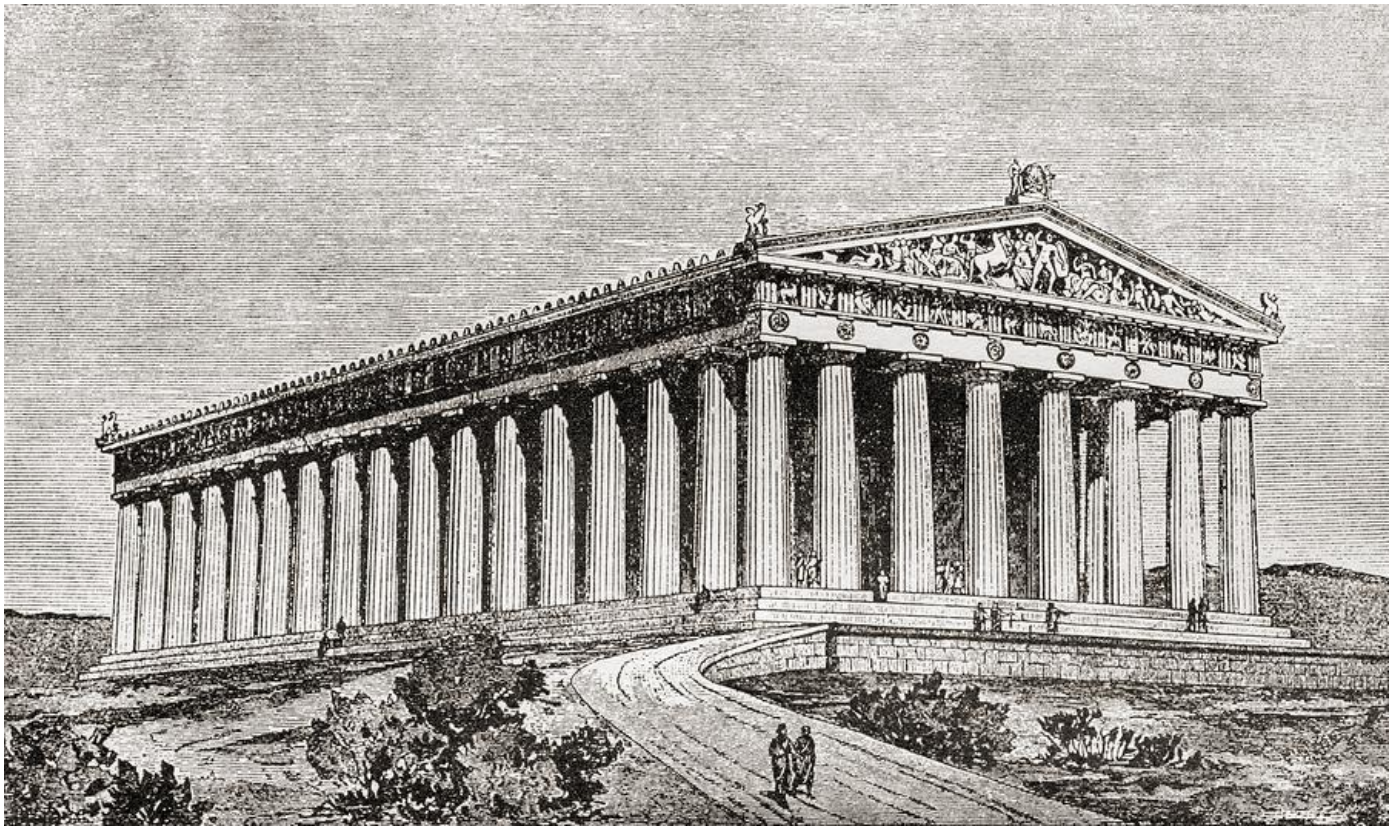

Fig. 4. Exterior of the Parthenon at Athens, Greece, as it Would Have Appeared in Ancient Times. (Source: Harmsworth History of the World)

A symbol of Classicism and the grandeur of the ancient Western tradition, the development of excavations and research around the Parthenon in the late 18th and early 19th centuries fascinated scholars, diplomats, and governments from around the world that wished to intertwine their legacy with the material greatness left behind in the ruins and rubble of these massive Classical structures (Fig. 4). The Imperialist practices and ideologies that had become so normalized in Britain during this period ignited a passionate desire to collect in the minds of wealthy and well-connected society members. Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin and ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, closely studied the Classical Greek friezes that decorated the facades of the Parthenon at the dawn of the 19th century. He was focused on creating plaster casts of the high reliefs and the sculptures, in order to bring the cultural influence and artistic excellence of the pieces home to Britain specifically. After realizing that the sculptures were being periodically removed from their original placement anyway, Elgin found a way to bribe local Ottoman officials to send the actual friezes back to Britain, where they remain on display in the Duveen Gallery at the British Museum, despite the protests of the Greek government and global cultural institutions. The intensity with which he desired to bring back these ancient friezes or replicate them was not driven by a monetary desire or a desire for fame alone, but rather for a desire to collect symbols of Western antiquity to elevate the sophistication of British cultural heritage. So valuable to the elevation of British national culture were these friezes seen in the eyes of Elgin that he intentionally turned down offers that would have made the Marbles profitable to him as the seller. Instead, the Parthenon Marbles ended in the hands of the British government, where they were then carefully transferred to the British Museum, where they would be barred from returning to the toasted, sun-drenched hills of Athens that they had resided in for hundreds of years. Although instinctually it may be easy to assume that most members of high society at the time *must* have aligned themselves to the imperialist disposition that justified questionable and illegal acquisitions of major artifacts from around the globe, the reality is that the actions of Lord Elgin, and many like him at the time, were explicitly criticized by well-respected members of society that acknowledged the importance of a nation's autonomy as it relates to their cultural identity, and the influence of historic and cultural value that these pieces inherently carry. The manner in which the Elgin Marbles were acquired by Lord Elgin was highly disputed throughout Britain upon the arrival of the massive friezes, and well-respected intellectuals and advocates from all academic and professional backgrounds voiced their opposition and condemnation of Elgin's actions. Famed English poet Lord Byron, whose works uniquely combined fragments of classical theory with the budding pillars of Romanticism, is known to have outspokenly regarded Elgin's transportation of the marbles and actions in Athens as defacement and unacceptable vandalism. Although the intention and the end result of Lord Elgin's questionable acquisition of the Marbles have been consistently argued for centuries at this point, what truly cannot be argued is that the Parthenon now suffers a lack of

structural cohesion and unity because of the way in which it was compartmentalized and taken apart for transport and exhibition in Britain in 1798.

Fig. 5. Tourists at the Duveen Gallery in the British Museum. (Source: ArtNet News)

The centuries-long dispute over the Elgin Marbles is not one-of-a-kind. All over the world, priceless remnants of global cultural heritage have been fought over and pursued by governments, academic institutions, research organizations, and museum establishments, but to no avail. Priceless antiquities are isolated from the regions that contextualize their identity and their historic influence, and they begin to be perceived by the general public and unknowing tourists as individual structures rather than masterfully crafted pieces that make up an entire whole (Fig. 5). The establishment of agencies like UNESCO, to whom global communities look to for professional, objective, and just decision making, will never be able to overpower the damaging decisions that self-serving governments or organizations choose to make. If UNESCO had been an active agency at the time that Lord Elgin approached the newly unearthed friezes, can we truly say this would have been avoided? Should UNESCO reserve its services and offerings of mediation solely to government entities, and if so, how would that prevent private institutions from completely ignoring the well-meaning pillars established by treaties like the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property? Unless individual organizations or government bodies take accountability for the way they ensure that precious antiquities are handled, curators of world heritage sites and those who understand the stories that these structures and objects tell can only hope that illegally obtained items will find their way back home in the end.

References:

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