

Title: Museum of Light: The New Acropolis Museum and the Campaign to Repatriate the Elgin Marbles

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Abstract:

It is almost half-a-dozen years since the New Acropolis Museum in Athens was inaugurated in June 2009, following a gestation period of over three decades. Before, during and after the construction of the building, the importance of natural light was frequently emphasised by the Museum's Swiss-French architect, Bernard Tschumi, as well as many Greek government officials, archaeologists, and other heritage professionals. The manner in which the same bright sunlight illuminates both the Parthenon and the temple's decorative sculptures which are now on display in the Museum, is also routinely referenced by campaigners advocating a return of those sculptures that were removed from the Athenian Acropolis on the orders of Lord Elgin between 1801–03 and subsequently shipped to London. Following the purchase of the collection by the British government in 1816, the Marbles of the Elgin Collection were presented to the British Museum, where they are presently on display in Room 18, the Duveen Gallery. However, for more than two centuries it has been maintained that the sculptures can only be truly appreciated when viewed in the natural light of Athens. Even before the completion of the New Acropolis Museum there were bitter attacks on the manner in which the Marbles are displayed in the British Museum, and the quality of the illumination afforded to the sculptures in the Duveen Gallery. The aesthetics of the Attic light has therefore taken its place as one of the principal weapons in the armoury of Greek officials and international campaigners seeking the return of the Marbles removed by Lord Elgin. Nonetheless, this paper will argue against the accepted orthodoxy that the New Acropolis Museum replicates the original light conditions many of the sculptures from the temple experienced when on the Parthenon. Indeed, this article will dispute the goal of many architects, politicians, and heritage professionals of the need ensure that, when on public display, all of the Parthenon sculptures are bathed in bright natural light. The ability to display the Marbles in the sun-drenched gallery of the New Acropolis Museum forges a powerful link binding the environment of Classical Athens with the present-day capital of Greece, offering politicians and activists seeking the repatriation of the Elgin Marbles a potent weapon wielded to great effect. However, the politically motivated design parameters laid on the museum, requiring the building admit vast amounts of natural Attic light, has destroyed the architectural context the Marbles were displayed in when originally affixed to the temple in the fifth century BC.