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The British Museum Says It Will Never Return the Elgin Marbles, Defending Their Removal as a ‘Creative Act’

Hartwig Fischer's statements are already drawing international backlash.

Naomi Rea, January 28, 2019



Hartwig Fischer. Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images.

British Museum director Hartwig Fischer is facing international backlash after defending an English nobleman's removal of sculptures from the Parthenon in the

early 1800s as a “creative act,” and reiterated that the museum’s trustees would not support repatriating them to Athens.

In a recent interview with the Greek daily newspaper *Ta Nea*, Fischer said that when museums offer a new context to engage with cultural heritage they are being creative. “When you move cultural heritage into a museum, you move it out of context. Yet that displacement is also a creative act,” Fischer said.

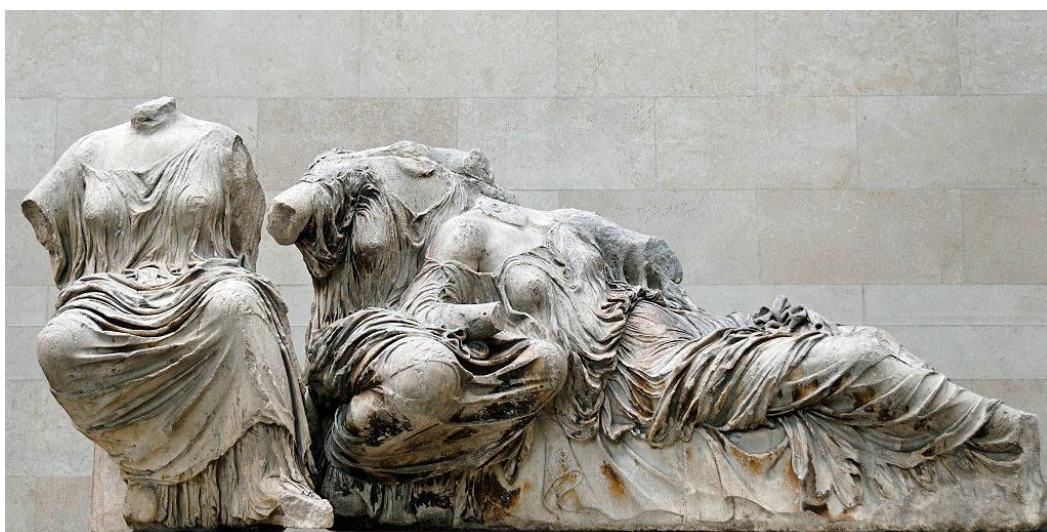
The museum director’s comments have already sparked rebuke. “The imperialist patronage of the British Museum has no limits,” George Vardas, secretary of the international association for the reunifications of the Parthenon sculptures, told the Greek paper. Vardas said that Fischer’s comments came from a place of “amazing historical revisionism and arrogance.”

“What is the creative cause of the destruction of the temple and the plundering of the keys of the ancient history of a nation?” he asked.

Originally made by the fifth-century sculptor Phidias, the classical sculptures were later integrated into the Parthenon and other structures on the Acropolis. Some refer to the collection in London as the Elgin Marbles, after the British aristocrat Lord Elgin who removed them.

Fischer said that the sculptures “tell different stories” about the Parthenon, which at various times was a temple of Athena, a Christian church, and a mosque. It was rediscovered following years of neglect after a bombing in 1687. “The rediscovery is obviously part of European history,” Fischer said, adding that the museum shows the sculptures in a context of world cultures.

“Since the beginning of the 19th century, the monument’s history is enriched by the fact that some [parts of it] are in Athens and some are in London where six million people see them every year,” Fischer argued.



Part of the Elgin Marbles, statues housed in the British museum were originally part of the Parthenon in Athens. Photo by VCG Wilson/Corbis via Getty Images.

He also said that the sculptures were no more made for the Acropolis Museum, an archaeological museum in Athens opposite the Parthenon, than they were for the British Museum, neither being their “original context.”

Although Greeks have been petitioning for the marbles’ return since 1832, and opinion polls have found that the British public is largely in favor of reuniting the sculptures in Athens, there are no active talks between the museum and Greek officials. Fischer also said that while the museum does engage in long-term loans, “there are no indefinite loans.”



[George Vardas](#) @VardasGeorge

The current [#BritishMuseum](#) director invokes revisionist history and discredited museological principles as the British Museum rules out loaning [#Parthenon](#) Marbles to [#Greece](#), instead insisting that they belong in London. <http://www.ekathimerini.com/237054>



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The director of the British Museum, Hartwig Fischer, insisted in an interview published by Greece's Ta Nea newspaper on Saturday that Greece is not the legal owner of the Parthenon Marbles and ruled...
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Fischer added that the government would have to rewrite laws in order to return the sculptures because their legal owners are the British Museum's trustees, who had the responsibility of preserving the museum's collections for future generations conferred on them by the British Parliament.

The leader of the UK's Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, pledged to oversee their return and said that if he were prime minister he would ensure their repatriation. But Fischer disregarded Corbyn's statement as his "personal view," which is not in line with the opinions of the museum's trustees.