

## British Museum's Greek sculpture show expected to restart marbles row



*Some of the Parthenon marbles held by the British Museum, which had another record-breaking year in 2013, with visitor numbers up by 20% to 6.7m. Photograph: Laurie Chamberlain/Corbis*

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The British Museum is planning an exhibition on the human body in Greek sculpture – which will inevitably stir up feelings on the most famous and bitterly contested Greek sculptures in the world, the procession of warriors, torch bearers, priests, musicians, nymphs and centaurs of the Parthenon marbles.

Although director Neil MacGregor said the exhibition, planned for next spring, would include "key loans", he refused to say whether the museum will be seeking any of the sculptures from the Parthenon temple that Greece still holds or any other loans from Greece.

Some of the British Museum's Parthenon marbles will be included, shown beside sculptures from other countries heavily influenced by the muscular bodies and fluttering draperies perfected by the ancient Greek sculptors.

The ownership of the sculptures, known as the Elgin Marbles for most of their two

centuries in Britain, became a festering dispute after Lord Elgin secured a permit from the early 19th century Ottoman rulers of Greece to strip them from the temple on the Acropolis mount in Athens and ship them to England – where after years of wrangling about the price, the government bought them for the museum.

Relations have not improved in the five years since the Greek government opened a new museum on the slopes of the Acropolis, pointedly displaying copies of the missing sculptures beside its part of the great frieze, which originally ran along the four sides of the 2,500-year-old temple. The Louvre, the Vatican and other museums also hold Parthenon stones.

The controversy was stirred up again this year when the US actor George Clooney, promoting his new film about looted art, *The Monuments Men*, said it would be "very nice" if Bloomsbury gave the marbles back to Athens.

The repeated response of the trustees of the British Museum has been that the marbles form an inalienable part of the collection, where they are available free to visitors all over the world.

The museum announced in its annual review that it has had another record-breaking year, with visitor numbers up in 2013 by 20% to 6.7m, making it the leading UK attraction and the second most visited museum in the world. Its touring exhibitions in Britain were seen by another 2 million – including queues stretching out the door for Romans at the Norwich castle museum – and its international exhibitions, including a US tour of the Cyrus Cylinder, one of the most famous cuneiform inscriptions from ancient Babylon. In addition it had more than 20 million visitors to its website, and the live cinema evenings from the Pompeii and Vikings exhibitions were seen all over the world. The museum also tops the list of the world's lending collections.

Vikings, the first exhibition in its new temporary exhibition gallery, part of the £135m extension which will open fully later this month, attracted almost 300,000 visitors, selling almost every ticket for every day of the four month run. The museum's next significant project is the redisplay of its sculpture collections, MacGregor said, and its next dilemma the future of its famous round Reading Room, where scholars and authors from Karl Marx to Mahatma Gandhi to Virginia Woolf pored over their books beneath the soaring dome.

The room, since 2,000 the centrepiece of the new Great Court, has been left without an obvious function since the British Library moved to St Pancras in 1997. Since 2007 it has been used as an exhibition space with the desks, Grade-I listed like the rest of the building, hidden beneath a temporary floor, where blockbuster shows including the Terracotta Army and Pompeii were mounted.

A public debate will be launched this autumn, MacGregor said. Any permanent change of use – such as for a glorious sculpture gallery, he let slip, before correcting himself and insisting that the museum has an open mind on its future – would need planning and listed building consent.

Despite the achievements of the year, including a new gallery holding the greatest

Anglo Saxon treasure so far found, the Sutton Hoo collection, MacGregor said he was most proud of one acquisition, a new loading bay, part of the new wing and the first in the 255 history of the museum.

In the past the biggest travelling crates had to be manhandled up the front steps after the museum closed, and the size of loans was dictated by the dimensions of the doorway – some of the Pompeii loans got in with a few centimetres to spare. The new loading bay is big enough to allow lorries enter straight into the shelter of the museum. It has transformed the handling of loans arriving or leaving the building – but it is most unlikely to be needed for Parthenon marbles sent by Greece any time soon.