

Loan of Elgin Marble to Russia 'provocative and insensitive'

British expert Eddie O'Hara accuses British Museum of chilling relations with Athens

Author: **Nick Squires**, in Rome and Victoria Ward

Date: **5 December 2014**

Publication: **The Telegraph**



The Elgin Marbles at the British Museum

The head of an association campaigning for the Elgin Marbles to be given back to Greece has said the British Museum's decision to loan one of the pieces to Russia is "frankly provocative."

"I'm incensed by this," said Eddie O'Hara, the chairman of the British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, which has campaigned for their restitution for 30 years. "It's at best insensitive and at worst, frankly provocative." The British Museum is loaning a marble statue of the river god Ilissos to the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg until Jan 18.

It is the first time that the London museum has lent out one of the sculptures, which were taken from Athens by Lord Elgin, a British diplomat, at the start of the 19th century.

Greece has been demanding the return of the sculptures and friezes for decades, and has enlisted the help of a British legal team, led by Geoffrey Robertson QC and Amal Clooney, the new wife of George Clooney, to press its claim more forcefully.

They visited Athens in October, touring the Acropolis Museum and holding talks with the Greek government about initiating a possible legal fight.

“The British Museum says the loan to St Petersburg will help un-chill relations with Russia, but at the same time they are chilling relations with Athens,” Mr O’Hara, a former Labour MP for Knowsley South in Merseyside, told The Telegraph. “I’m sure there are plenty of Russian artefacts in the British Museum that they could have leant to St Petersburg.”

“The timing is very provocative. Last year Unesco asked the British government and the British Museum to submit the issue to mediation. They received no response. Last month Unesco asked them once again to respond. Again, there has been no response. Instead the British Museum has decided to loan one of the sculptures to the Russians. It’s provocative and downright rude.” The headless marble statue is one of a number of similar items that once decorated the Parthenon, the temple which crowns the Acropolis, the rugged, sheer-sided redoubt that looms over Athens.

The British Museum said it would be difficult to make a similar loan to the Acropolis Museum because the Greeks have always indicated that they would not be prepared to give the artefacts back.

The campaign to have the marbles given back to the Greeks would continue, said Mr O’Hara. “The artistic integrity of the Parthenon is compromised under the current situation,” he said. “They should be seen in their proper setting.”

The chairman of the Marbles Reunited campaign, Liberal Democrat MP Andrew George, said the trustees were wrong to snub the Greek request for the return of the sculptures and to lend them instead "to a country which has backed rebels who kill British citizens". "Neil MacGregor justifies his decision by claiming that these sculptures should be 'shared and enjoyed by as many people...as possible'. But these sculptures have not been 'shared and enjoyed' by the Greeks for over 200 years, since they were purloined in a dodgy deal by Lord Elgin during a period when Greece was occupied by the Ottomans," he said. "I sense that the British Museum's grip on the sculptures is weakening.

If Britain did the decent and gracious thing and returned the sculptures, the Greeks have made clear that they would willingly loan many other Greek artefacts and great works to Britain so that they could be 'shared and enjoyed by as many people...as possible'." Conversely, historian Dominic Selwood said he thought the loan of Ilissos to Russia was "marvellous" and proof that the marbles were world class artefacts that could be displayed and appreciated anywhere. "The British Museum exists to share knowledge and to share these wonderful things," he said.

"The Greek position is very backward and retrospective.

"Greek museums hold Egyptian and Chinese and South America artefacts. Is that any different to the British Museum holding Greek art?" Mr Selwood said the loan to Russia was "great for Greece and great for Greek heritage".