

A Cultural Heritage between two forces: Who shall preserve the Parthenon Marbles?

Ana Carolina Gelmini de Faria

*Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) -
Porto Alegre, Brazil*

Kimberly Terrany Alves Pires

*Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) -
Porto Alegre, Brazil*

Several collections that represent the history of humanity had arisen from raids and spoils of war that were later incorporated into museums. Objects have been protected through time and human action by institutions that have preserved, researched, and made those collections worldwide known. This investigation proposes an immersion into the museological debates covering repatriation, identifying direct relations to the concept of museality. For this analysis, we have taken as our study object the collection of the Parthenon Marbles, which the dispute between the British Museum (England), the current holder of the collection, and the one which claims its ownership, the Acropolis Museum (Greece), not only involves the material and economic value of the objects but also their significance that can create different discourses, depending on the institution holding the collection.

According to Waldisa Guarnieri (Guarnieri, 2010), we only preserve what has a value, one could say social value, stemmed from some kind of collective consciousness. For the author, “Cultural Patrimony is a question of historic consciousness” (Guarnieri, 2010, p.121). For that matter, museums have become responsible for the creation of discourses, binding them to the materiality via musealization process, conjectured by Desvallées and Mairesse (2013, p. 57) as an operation “[...] of material and conceptual extraction of something from its natural or cultural original environment, granting to it a museal status”, in other words, a musealia - object of a museum. The Museum works in changing an object’s status, and according to Stransky (1970 as cited in Desvallées & Mairesse, 2013, p.57) “[...] a museum object is not only an object in a museum”. Therefore, musealization traces the moment of passage to a new cultural reality, enhancing new narratives.

From the decolonial perspective, repatriation allows nations that have lost their patrimonies to create their narratives of world history, “[...] the post-colonial

perspective stresses critics and deconstruction of some naturalized narratives, also in the cultural heritage sphere” (Costa, 2018, p.101). Many cases result in repatriation or restitution requests that, in the majority of instances, involve governments and museums.

The protection of cultural assets removed illegally from their original context is an issue first discussed in the Convention of Haia in 1899, followed by the conventions of 1907 and 1957. A significant contribution of those events was the comprehension that the destruction of cultural assets owned by any nation constituted havoc to the whole cultural heritage of humanity, due to the conception that each population contributes to world culture in a specific way. (Convention of Haia, 1954).

Let us emphasize that in 1970 a new policy for the protection of patrimony fastened parameters and instruments to protect cultural assets during periods of peace. One of the goals of UNESCO Convention in 1970 was the creation of mechanisms to prohibit and thwart the illegal import, export, and conveyance of cultural patrimonies (General Conference UNESCO, 1970). Later, the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage took place in 1972. This one proposed the establishment of a system of international cooperation, where the most industrialized countries would help those still in development, so they could identify and preserve their natural and cultural heritage by producing an international inventory of cultural and natural patrimony of universal interest. Following this, the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation was organized in which those jurisdictions bound to UNESCO the possibility of requesting the return of collections that have been removed from their original country.

Relevant to this discussion, the museums are agents of memory preservation, thus in this overview about the Parthenon Marbles case, we present the two safeguard institutions, both with different missions and visions. The institution which claims back the heritage, the Acropolis Museum, presents and proposes an exhibition that delineates the origins of Greek national identity and ensures the depiction of the Parthenon Marbles absence in the exposition. The institution recognizes the nation by what is proper in its history, allowing the indication of the singularities and, through this, the construction of collective identities, defending the idea that each nation builds itself. On the other hand, the institution that currently holds the collection, the British Museum, proffers an encyclopedic collection discourse, as many times found in museums from the XIX century, with a national approach that seeks a universal aspect (Pomian, 1991).

According to British Museum contextualization, the permanence of this collection is validated by a universal discourse that is still ratified by the great number of visitors who view those objects. The British Museum bestows a more traditional exhibition form, with cramped settings and objects stripped of their context and original references. This institution is based on the concept of world heritage which mostly defends the protection of common interest objects. Some radical

lines of opinion defend the extinction of this kind of museum, alleging that they are part of a group of institutions that reinforce the traditional model of the national museums. The discussion leaves room for changes in the museums studies field, with fewer iconoclast representations and the opinion that it is not feasible to represent the whole history (Tostes, 2011).

When we step on the scenario brought by the Acropolis Museum, which highlights the lack of spatial forms of the Marbles on the exhibition context, it is possible to identify the value of those objects for the construction of the greek national history. In that sense, to hold the collection would mean to learn and to reconnect with the roots of greek culture, since the marbles and the Parthenon Temple themselves had an original function of transmitting messages thought the images depicted on the panels. Therefore, its incompleteness shatters the significance connected to the cultural good (Kynourgiopoulou, s.d.).

From the 1980s onwards, Greece has begun a worldwide campaign for the return of the Parthenon Marbles. In 2012, demanding an international range broadcast, the *Independent Voluntary Movement for the Repatriation of the Looted Greek Antiquities* created a campaign entitled *I Am Greek and I Want to Go Home*¹. The efforts of the country stressed that the museal value would vary in accordance to the institutional approach, as we can notice distinct interventions on the representation of the same collection under whichever museal institution holds it. In this case, for the British Museum, it traces the history of humanity, and for the Acropolis Museum, it would be a reaffirmation of national identity.

According to Marshall Sahlins (2003 as cited in Dohmann, 2013, p.36) “no object at all, nothing is or has movement in human society, except through the meanings that mankind attributes to it”. The Parthenon Marbles, which used to be a structural part of an edifice for religious worship, turned into fragmented pieces surrounded by values such as authenticity, uniqueness, historicity.

The case presented is about the same collection comprehended by two museological institutions with distinctive proposals. In this case, there is no right interpretation, but contexts that ascribe different meanings to the Parthenon Marbles. Stransky (1983 as cited in Brulon, 2017) stresses that more than point out the value of things, the importance of the museal work is to understand the motivations behind the acquirement of the value, since being under the condition of musealia, they document a reality through another reality. Evidences from the two institutions demonstrate that inside the musealization chain, the process of identification of the “potential museality” in the objects, the insertion of the object in the documental system of a museum’s new reality, and the museologic communication (the way a collection acquires meaning) would be distinctive from each other, because, as according to Brulon (2017, p.414) “[...] an object that is thought a priori as holder of museality and selected according

1. Watch the video on the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7swmqoVROUk>. Access on: Mar. 27 2020.

to its potenciality based on existing values, [can] [...] acquire new values when communicated in a museologic discourse”.

Approaches to subjects associating cultural heritage domains, as well as repatriation requests around the world, indicate how an emerging movement can foster many debates. This way, future requests shall be proposed by nations with a historical consciousness about their cultural legacy, constraining collections policies of colonizer countries to rethink their practices on a global scale. The contemporary demands require from the museal field the development of museological thoughts promoting social bonds, human rights, dialogue, institutional cooperation, and strengthening constructive relations between institutions and society.

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