

## XIV

### Were the Greek Artefacts, purchased from Elgin, ‘Marbles’ or ‘Stones’?

An investigation of the perceived aesthetic value of the Elgin Marbles through analysis of John Keats’s sonnet ‘To Haydon’ and George Cruikshank’s caricature *The Elgin Marbles! or John Bull buying stones at the time his numerous family want bread.*

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*The controversy of the purchase of the Elgin Marbles in 1816 created many ripples in the artistic and political strata of society. In particular, the opinions on the artistic value of these artefacts ranged from fascination and hence their perception as priceless through to complete disregard, and subsequently a waste of money. References and views on this debate were expressed in many works of the day, including the statues being praised in poetry and mocked in satirical prints. This article will use two examples of the day, John Keats’s sonnet ‘To Haydon’ and George Cruikshank’s caricature ‘The Elgin Marbles!’ to investigate whether at the time of their acquisition these Greek statues were recognized to be an aesthetic treasure.*

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**T**he Elgin marbles deliberations, regarding their existential aspect of whether they actually were the mesmerizing art they were claimed to be, flared up in the moment these artifacts landed on English soil. They were praised as ‘the marbles’ or belittled as ‘stones’; they were ‘divine’ and ‘second rate’;<sup>1</sup> they were controversial. Debates also extended past the aesthetic deliberations through to considering the value, provenance and the English right to ownership (some of which are still ongoing today). The discussions continued for years before peaking in at the time of their acquisition by the English government in 1816. Powerful opinions were expressed in 1816-7 in

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<sup>1</sup> John Keats, ‘Two Sonnets. To Haydon, With A Sonnet Written On Seeing The Elgin Marbles’, <<https://allpoetry.com/Two-Sonnets.-To-Haydon,-With-A-Sonnet-Written-On-Seeing-The-Elgin-Marbles>> [accessed 01 Feb 2018] (l.11); ‘Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin’s Collection or Sculptured Marbles; &c’ Ordered by *The House of Commons*, 25 March 1816, p.42.

literature, art, political satire, John Keats' sonnet 'To Haydon' and George Cruikshank's caricature *The Elgin Marbles! or John Bull buying stones at the time his numerous family want bread* being examples of such. The stark difference in the treatment of the Greek statues in the aforementioned works by the poet and the cartoonist will permit one to gauge the polarity of the debate of whether they were 'marbles' or mere 'stones'.

Both of the works are reactive pieces, produced following the intensive negotiations for the Elgin marble acquisition. Keats wrote the sonnet as an emotional response to seeing the statues in the British museum only days after his visit in early March 1817.<sup>2</sup> This was not a private remark, but a passionate public statement, printed in *The Examiner* on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1817, with the intent to re-emphasize the grandeur of 'these mighty things'.<sup>3</sup> Not only does Keats do this in lauding these masterpieces but he also praises B.R. Haydon, the contemporary prominent painter and public figure and a passionate advocate of Hellenism, for recognizing their splendor. Only a year earlier, the latter wrote in the same publication that the 'Elgin Marbles [are] above all other works of Art in the world', attributing to them equivalent importance to art as Newton to Philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

The trigger for Cruikshank's reaction was not an actual experience of the Marbles but the political decision to purchase them. Following the extensive process of inquiry into their provenance and value first by the House of Commons, then by a specially appointed Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculptured Marbles &c, a conclusion was reached acknowledging that they were acquired in a legal fashion and valuing them at £35,000. Following another bitter debate in House of Commons, a vote of 82 to 30 in favour of purchasing the Marbles was cast. Although the artistic acquisition was deemed beneficial to the English nation's enrichment and education, this was not so clear-cut for the man on the street. Cruikshank captured the mindset in his cartoon, where the exorbitant expenditure on some museum exhibits was considered unjustified, given the year of hunger and poor harvest. While John Bull is listening to Lord Castlereagh's (Leader of the House of Commons at the time) proposal to purchase the marbles, famished children are tugging on his coat, urging him not to buy the stones, but to give them bread. Half-naked, scrappy, tired and hungry, they represent the common man, left without bread and support and as if in mockery, being offered the grotesque statues instead.

The beauty and aesthetic appeal of the statues was not apparent in the day, and the convoluted perceptions are obvious when comparing the two artefacts. For Keats, they were awe-inspiring. The sonnet was written quickly, skimming the very first impressions that he had, and hence translating it

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<sup>2</sup> This came as a part of a two-sonnet composition: 'To Haydon' and 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles'.

<sup>3</sup> 'To Haydon' ll.2. The version of 1817 was signed with the initials, 'J.K.', only. However, in 1818 the poem was reprinted with Keats's full name.

<sup>4</sup> B.R. Haydon, 'On the Judgement of Connoisseurs Being Preferred to that of Professional Men – Elgin Marbles, &c', *The Examiner*, 17 March 1816, p.163.



Figure 1. George Cruickshank, *The Elgin Marbles of John Bull buying stones at the time his numerous family want bread!!*, 1816, hand-coloured etching, 24.7 x 34.7 cm, British Museum © Trustees of the British Museum

into a proclamation of all-encompassing amazement. The impact that the statues had was so overwhelming that in the very first line Keats is brought to admit that he ‘cannot speak / Definitely of these mighty things’, as the wave of impressions made it impossible to shape an accurate opinion.<sup>5</sup> Neither did these overcoming emotions permit a close study or recollection of the particular details. Later, this initial reaction was reigned in, as the poet grows more closely acquainted with the Hellenic work, he delves into close detailed observation, as for example in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, where many rich descriptions such as ‘leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape’, but this closer appreciation occurred only three years after his first visit.<sup>6</sup>

Keats puts himself across as a narrator who feels passionate but diminished by the physical grandeur of the Greek display as well as their perfection. Considering one of the first displays of the statues, captured in the *Temporary Elgin Room*, the size, high display of the statues on platforms, as well as the unusually high density of Hellenic artifacts to be found in one room would have created a

<sup>5</sup> ‘To Haydon’ ll.1-2.

<sup>6</sup> John Keats, ‘Ode to a Grecian Urn’ <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn>> [accessed 05 Feb 2018] (1.5).

formidable show of the Greek gods. To any visitor, they would be ‘mighty’ in their appearance, strong and imposing. However, Keats did not merely find them grand, he found them ‘divine’.<sup>7</sup> Their worship demanding demeanor was not only brought on by their perfection but also by the enlightenment and guidance they offered to the arts, like a ‘star in the east’ to Christianity.<sup>8</sup> With this line, Keats not only echoes Haydon and his article in *The Examiner* but many other prominent figures such as Cavalier Canova, who in his letter to Elgin characterized the marbles as ‘exquisite knowledge of art’.<sup>9</sup>

Cruikshank’s cartoon ignores the aesthetics of the Greek statues and their impressiveness. In a manner completely opposite to Keats, the cartoonist diminishes the importance of the statues. He bunches them up together in one corner of the picture, dedicating less than a third of the piece and, therefore, emphasizing their secondary importance. In fact, Cruikshank depicted made up items, and not the actual Marbles, with this demonstrating the lack of particular significance of the Elgin Marbles in the face of any other Hellenic statues. From his point of view, one statue is exactly the same as another and does not deserve his time to be researched and distinguished. Hence, he gives these



Figure 2. Archibald Archer. *The Temporary Elgin Room in 1819 with portraits of staff, a trustee and visitors*, 1819, oil on canvas, 94 x 132.7 cm, The British Museum© Trustees of the British Museum.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘To Haydon’, l.11.

<sup>8</sup> ‘To Haydon’, l.14.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin’s Collection or Sculptured Marbles; &c’, p.68.

artifacts a generic and somewhat derogatory name - 'Stones'. The non-specific word 'stone' implies no craftsmanship has been applied to the item, leaving it in the rudimentary natural state that it was, when excavated from the ground. Moreover, it is emphasizing the point of view of a commoner. Removed from the fine world of art and vested in the more immediate needs of survival and food, statues were not marvels, but stones, with little purpose or value to the starving families.

The manner in which the caricaturist chose to depict the statues also emphasizes their lack of exceptional beauty. By adding the comical elements to the statues, Cruikshank mocks the classical canons of beauty and shifts the importance of the scene away from the display of the artifacts to the commercial negotiations associated with their purchase, that are happening in the forefront. In particular, the caricaturist focuses his efforts on the two of some of the most recognized symbols of Hellenic legends – Hercules and Venus.

The statue of Hercules is stripped of the powerful pose, that was so admired by many artists. He is standing on a disheveled pediment, his drapes missing, his broken off leg supported by a crude rock. This forlorn sight is enhanced by the framing of the scene in such a way as to leave him claustrophobically crammed into the corner. The god is no longer a fearful figure. Rather, Cruikshank chooses to debase him further and use the statues as ground to introduce elements of mockery of Elgin such as removing the nose, to give it the well-known lack of facial feature. He also drew the face to carry a look of impatience, as it looks onto the negotiation discussion and anticipates an outcome, like Elgin, who has been kept waiting for almost six years. At his feet lie remains of a Corinthian column, to remind the onlooker of the destruction he is responsible for.

Venus is also stripped of her distinguishing goddess features of grace and beauty. Frozen with her arm in the air (the other one would mirror this gesture judging by the angle of the shoulder), she is performing a whimsical female gesture, displaying ungodly impatience and dissatisfaction. At the bottom of Castlereagh's feet stands a fragment of a statue, being human buttocks, facing the head negotiator, to jeer him for his actions. The statue of Hermes surprisingly has managed to maintain all the intricate details, including the caduceus, which tactically hangs over Castlereagh's shoulder, to reiterate the importance of the commercial interaction that is taking place. Everything about the statues in Cruikshank's eyes was viewed through the prism of the expense that they presented. He saw no value in them as standalone items, and thus depicts them with little respect, molding them to deliver his utter dislike of the wasteful and mercantile transaction.

Cruikshank's materialistic approach also comes through in the emphasis on the poor condition of the statues. His depiction of the missing limbs of the statues is a focal point. The gaze of the onlooker is guided by Castlereagh's hand, towards Hercules' absent leg, supported by an unrefined block, while cutting across a precarious support for Venus. In the face of the stocky and well-grounded John Bull's family, they look exceptionally unstable and rickety, begging the question of being worthy of the

requested investment. In doing so, he not only demonstrates their low value, but also brings forth the point of view of the skeptical camp, lead by Mr. Payne Knight who saw them ‘so mutilated [*he could*] hardly tell’ if they were great sculptures or not.<sup>10</sup>

Although Keats does not overtly touch on this point in his sonnet, the reference to the marbles as ‘most divine’ implies that he only sees the ‘perfect flesh’.<sup>11</sup> He also passes the right of judgement over to Haydon, as the one with ‘eagle’s wings’, who in the face ‘brainless idiotism’ recognizes beauty and celebrates it. This therefore implies that Haydon’s opinion is supported by Keats and is in opposition with Payne’s attitude that something is ‘too broken to be of any value’.<sup>12</sup> Haydon, an outspoken critic of Mr. Knight and his appointment as head of the Select Committee for Elgin Marbles, strongly criticized him, stating that it is absurd not to recognize that ‘in the most broken fragment the same great principle of life can be proved to exist as well as in the most perfect figure’. For Haydon, and hence for Keats and the Romantic movement, the artistic value of the statues could never be discussed in relation to their entirety.

The debate of the aesthetic value of the Elgin Marbles also transcended into a discussion regarding their monetary worth and hence the price that they should fetch. As the Report of the Select Committee demonstrates with the variation of potential prices from £25,000 to £60,800 there were few objective guidelines to identify the final value.<sup>13</sup> The numbers proposed were speculative, using as the only fiscal baseline the Townley collection purchased over a decade earlier in 1805 for the British Museum for £20,000.<sup>14</sup> The otherwise proposed offers were solely based on the personal sentiments with regards to the significance of the statues. The lowest valuation was given by Payne, who from the first time he set his eyes on them in 1806 had undermined their importance stating that they were in fact of Roman origin and considered them overrated.<sup>15</sup> The hype over the marbles never completely caught up with this aesthetics connoisseur of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with him only slightly amending his opinion a few years later to admit that some of the items were first rate. On the other hand, to men of art, it was obvious that in the light of such beauty, the pound value was secondary. *The Times* printed only a couple of weeks after the decision of the Select Committee that ‘price should be no object in comparison to the benefits derived from them [the marbles]’.<sup>16</sup> And indeed it was not for either Keats

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin’s Collection or Sculptured Marbles; &c’, p.36.

<sup>11</sup> ‘To Haydon’, l.11; ‘Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin’s Collection or Sculptured Marbles; &c’, p.68.

<sup>12</sup> Haydon, ‘On the Judgement of Connoisseurs Being Preferred to that of Professional Men – Elgin Marbles, &c’, p.163.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin’s Collection or Sculptured Marbles; &c’, p.9.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin’s Collection or Sculptured Marbles; &c’, p.9.

<sup>15</sup> F.J. Messman, ‘Richard Payne Knight and the Elgin Marble Controversy’, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 13.1 (1973), p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> ‘London, Saturday, May 11, 1816.’ *The Times*, 11 May 1816, p.3 <<http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2119/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=oxford&tabID=T003&do>

or Haydon, both of whom ignored the financial aspect of the acquisition in the sonnet and article, being enthralled by the aesthetics of the display.

The sum paid however was a point of contention for Cruikshank, the issue resting not in the incorrect valuation of the marbles but the fact that such a payment was executed at all. The marbles in his eyes were not part of ‘the most precious collection’, evoking pride but imperfect stones.<sup>17</sup> In the face of a hunger-struck nation, such a transaction therefore was deemed farcical (as hinted at by the leaflet at Castlereagh’s feet of Ministerial Economy of Farce), the message further emphasized by the depiction of hungry children crying that they cannot eat stones but want bread.

Another point of dispute brought up by Cruikshank is the statement that this was a speculative deal between Elgin and the government. In the pinned leaflet at the top right-hand corner of the cartoon he suggests that Elgin specifically travelled to find ‘fragments of stone’ for John Bull. However, Bull is challenging this engagement, especially the commercial aspect of it by disputing the requirement to pay. He, and hence the public that he represents, believe that the marbles were received as a gift and hence the price demanded can only relate to the compensation of the transportation cost borne by Elgin. However, agreeing to this payment would mean that the government is compensating Elgin’s personal expenses from the public pocket for a mission that he devised himself and was not commissioned to execute. The scene is a mockery of the fact that the deal was ever considered, hinting at the irony of the government considering to pay an ‘enormous price for [only] packing and carriage’ for products of a mission that it never commissioned. The stark difference in opinion, between Keats, for whom finances had no relevance to such beauty, and Cruikshank for whom no beauty (especially contentious examples of beauty) were worthy of such expense, demonstrates that the perception of the value of the marbles ranged greatly. At the same time, in the midst of this debate, personal preferences determined the final price. To the arts-driven minority they were divine, to some collectors first class, to the hungry majority mere worthless stones.

The masses were neither aware of, nor interested in, the aesthetic value of the Elgin statues. This is poignantly identified in the cartoon by the fat, discontented woman’s statement: ‘take them back to the Turks’. To her, a representative of the majority of the population, the Marbles had no history, identity, or cultural association. From her perception, the sole point of reference was who sold them in the most recent transaction. Such lack of awareness and curiosity is also a snide remark from Cruickshank towards the enlightenment mission that Elgin claimed to have taken on himself (much in

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cPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS50609835&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0> [accessed 10 Feb 2018].

<sup>17</sup> ‘London, Saturday, May 11, 1816.’ *The Times*, p.3; ‘Collection online, “The Elgin Marbles! or John Bull buying stones at the time his numerous family want bread!!”, *The British Museum* (1996).

<[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1499585&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1499585&partId=1)> [accessed 12 Jan 2018].

line with the Dilettanti and other collector's ideology of the day).<sup>18</sup> The cartoonist jeers at the intent to educate the masses, questioning whether it is this extensive, brutish and deep-set ignorance, that men like Elgin are hoping to eradicate. He visually emphasizes the extent of this lack of education by making the character with the most unintelligent face and uttering the ignorant remarks the largest figure in the picture. As per Cruikshank, aesthetics was only relevant to the contented upper class, while the focus of the famished masses lay on their immediate needs.

The acquisition of Marbles spawned many controversies. However, one that is not touched on either by the Keats' sonnet or by Cruikshank's cartoon is one of their procurement. Multiple accusations against Elgin were brought forth, reproaching him for pillaging Athens, a cradle of European art, one of the key destinations of the Grand Tours taken. The question was so prominent, that it became one of the four topics for investigation by the Select Committee, indicating that the outcome of this argument lay on the path to agreement to the purchase of marbles. Although the resolution on the matter of this investigation body was in Elgin's favour, finding him a caring and conscientious procurer of art specimens, some passionate representatives of the literary circles were not convinced. The passion that led individuals like Byron to revere the Greek statues also caused anger with the fact that they were removed from their intended location in the Athenian temples. Byron dedicated entire sections of poems such as 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage' and 'Curse of Minerva' to direct stabs at Elgin's audacity in removing such treasures, calling his expedition 'plunderers of yon fane'.<sup>19</sup>

The marbles were filled with controversy from the moment that they landed on English soil. The opinion of the population split, the passionate men of art considering them a blessing to be had, and the pragmatic middle class, an unnecessary expense on some stones. Perhaps they would have remained as just stones should the European arts community have not constructed their importance. However, their novelty, sheer size and sophistication did not go unmarked, mesmerizing the art inclined audience. The opinion of key figureheads in Europe grew to be supportive, changing the value and desirability of the marbles from tenuous to tangible and rendering the foresightful statement of *The Times*' correspondent true: 'Millions will not buy such a treasure in the future'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bruce Redford, *Dilettanti. The Antic and Antique in Eighteenth-Century England* (Getty Publications: Los Angeles, 2008), p.12.

<sup>19</sup> Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5131/5131-h/5131-h.htm> [accessed 05 Feb 2018] (XI l.1).

<sup>20</sup> 'Elgin Marbles', *The Times*, 19 April 1816, p.3 <<http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2119/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=oxford&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=&docId=CS51003027&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>> [accessed 12 Feb 2018].

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