AT A TIME when issues of "national heritage" seem to arouse passion, the Elgin Marbles (pronounced with a hard "g") are regularly invoked. For many the matter seems simple: They were stolen from Greece by an English lord and, since they are the symbol of all that ancient Greece -- as progenitor of modern civilization and democracy -- stands for, they must go back. It might not hurt to consider just what they are.

In the middle of the fifth century B.C., Athens, which we regard as the home of democracy, was more effectively an imperial state, which had taken advantage of success against the Persian invasion to generate an "empire" in Greece. This had come to exclude only those too powerful to be conquered, and Athens was probably the most hated state in Greece. It was also rich, from Persian spoils and "tribute" from its empire. Athens' leaders, notably Pericles, wished to demonstrate their success and claim a role for Athens as champion of the Greeks, through the construction of a great temple -- the Parthenon.

There was no Greek "nation" as such, and Greeks spent much of their energy fighting one another. The gold and ivory cult statue of Athena within the temple was to be a demonstration of wealth rather than piety, and attracted no cult. The sculptural decoration was to extol Athens' role in Greece and as favorite of all its gods.

So we find all 12 Olympian gods celebrating Athens: the birth of the city-state's goddess, Athena, in the front pediment; below it, on a string of square reliefs (metopes), the gods' fight with the Giants to secure their mastery of Greece; within the outer colonnade, in the wall-top frieze facing out, is their reception of victorious Athenians as heroes; on the cult statue's base, their blessing of Pandora, who seems a mortal equivalent of Athena, endowed with more human virtues; on the statue's shield, again, the battle with the gods. The program was unique in Greece, where temple decoration more strictly observed the needs of the local cult. This was a statement of power more in keeping with what a Persia, Assyria or Egypt might have devised. It was not one to which many other Greeks would have responded favorably, and the defeat of Athens and dismantling of its walls at the end of the fifth century must have seemed a proper retribution for such hubris. So there is not much, indeed nothing here, of Greek democracy.

But the sculptural decoration was sublime. Greek artists had, only 50 years before, begun to move away from the mannerism of the Archaic Style, and were beginning to create an idealized realism in the arts that was totally new for antiquity anywhere, and remains influential today. The best work was in bronze, but the best surviving in marble is that from the Parthenon.

The Parthenon's cult statue went to Constantinople, where it was destroyed; the building was converted into a Christian church, defacing and displacing some of the sculpture; then into a mosque; then its interior was blown up in an explosion. By the late 18th century, in Ottoman Turkish hands, it had become an attraction for western Europeans on the Grand Tour, and a quarry not only for local builders, but for collectors of ancient art. "Spare nothing," said a French collector, "neither the dead nor the live."
Lord Elgin first came not to collect but to copy, in plaster casts, as much of the sculpture as was available. These he would take to England to inform the arts of his day, heavily Neoclassical but quite lacking in the true Classical finesse. We can see from early casts that even within the period of his visits original relief figures on the frieze were being chiseled away, presumably for visitors; all were threatened. The only way to save them was to remove the originals. The oriental bargaining that went on and the interpretation of licenses to remove sculpture from the Acropolis are the stuff of modern arguments about "legality" that are quite foreign to the manners of the early 1800s.

Sculptures from the Parthenon -- but by no means all of them, since many remained in situ until a few years ago, when they had to be rescued from the atmosphere of an industrial Athens -- were taken by Elgin to England. Eventually, at great financial loss to him, they were acquired by the British Museum. Their appearance created a revolution, influencing artistic thought during the 19th century and subsequently. And in London they have remained to instruct and delight millions annually. If returned to Athens they could only go into another museum and be seen by far fewer people, since Greece is visited less for art than for sunshine. The Elgin Marbles' aesthetic effect in antiquity was slight -- they were a symptom of a broader movement. But in Britain they transformed scholarly attitudes to Greek art world-wide, and have had more effect in the past 200 years than they did in over 2,000 in Athens.

In a way the story of the Elgin Marbles reflects various modern dogmas. What is "cultural heritage"? Does it belong to producers -- or to the admirers who appreciate and are influenced by it? To take a local example: The Metropolitan Museum of Art recently agreed to return a fine Greek vase to Italy, whence it was probably illegally exported. But it was made in Greece; traded in antiquity to Italy, where it went straight into a tomb; and, in the past century, traded to New York, where it has gladdened and instructed millions who are as much heirs to the classical tradition in the arts as any in Europe. Perhaps the "heritage of man" deserves the widest audience possible.

---

Mr. Boardman is a retired professor of classical art and archaeology in Oxford, England. His next book is "The World of Ancient Art."
Letters to the editor in response to the article on the Elgin marbles:

(c) 2005 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

In response to the May 1 Letters to the Editor ("Greece Should Have All Its Marbles") disputing John Boardman's defense of Lord Elgin's acquisition of the Elgin Marbles (Leisure & Arts, Pursuits, April 22):

The Elgin Marbles are indisputably the property of the British Museum, which has the moral right as well as the legal right to decide whether to keep them or to return them to Athens.

Their original owner was the Athenian city-state, which lost its charter to Phillip II of Macedon 2,300 years ago. In other words, the original city, which would otherwise have a valid right to reclaim the Marbles, no longer exists. The city changed hands a number of times, and it was the Ottoman overlord who, in 1816, licensed Lord Elgin to remove the Marbles from their corrosive Athenian smog-bath. He exercised his license, or firman, and then transferred them to the British Museum, which in turn enshrined them for the benefit of all who wish to enjoy their beauty.

From a moral perspective, Western civilization is not defined by geographical space. It exists in our tradition of reverence for the power and dignity of the individual mind. If it does exist in places, it exists in places like the British Museum.

Randall Kilgore
Sacramento, Calif.

I read with some disbelief the arguments put forward by John Boardman ("What Were the Elgin Marbles?" Leisure & Arts, Pursuits, April 22). His casual dismissal of the important connections between the creators of the friezes on the Parthenon and the current inhabitants of Greece reeked of colonialism and an Old World self-satisfaction ("Greece is visited less for art than for sunshine") that is not often seen in the 21st century. More importantly, his defense of Elgin's and other Europeans' "acquisitions" was entirely focused on the past. Fine, Mr. Boardman, the British Empire did what it had to do to save these precious pieces of art for posterity. Now that the British Empire is no more, and the modern-day Greek government is pressing for the return of its rightful property, and has even built a new building to house them, it is shameful that the British continue to refuse to return them.

The British government and the authorities of the British Museum argue that if the Parthenon sculptures were returned, it would set a precedent by which all the great museums of the world would ultimately have to return their treasures to their country of origin. This is understandably not a position that the British would like to find themselves in, but that doesn't mean that they can dismiss the idea out of hand.
Using Mr. Boardman's logic that "cultural heritage belongs to the admirers who appreciate and are influenced by it," I propose that the British Crown Jewels be moved from the Tower of London to Orlando, Fla. They will surely be admired by many more people, and, as Mr. Boardman says, "gladden and instruct millions who are as much heirs to the classical tradition in the arts as any in Europe."

Peter Adamczyk

Chatham, N.J.

---

Mr. Boardman advocates the retention of great works of ancient art, pilfered, stolen or illegally bought, as long as there is a larger audience to view them. He fails to mention the great sculptor Phidias, who is responsible for the marbles of the Parthenon. Indeed, why name them after the person who took them away from their original sites instead of their creator? Prof. Boardman claims that "the Elgin marbles' aesthetic effect in antiquity was slight" thus completely ignoring their (and similar works') influence on the development of Roman art from the second century B.C. to the third century A.D.

Keeping ancient works of art that have been removed from their original sites purely on the basis of the numbers of people then exposed to them is wrong. Shall we buy and dismantle Petra and take it to Los Angeles? Take the Xian warriors to Beijing? Perhaps the "Phidias" marbles should be taken to Mexico City, a most populous city.

To be properly appreciated, the "heritage of man" should be fully experienced in the surroundings in which it was born, whenever this is possible. The marbles should be returned to Greece.

Prof. Joseph Di Pietro

Charlotte, N.C.