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Imperial Archives: French and British Museology from the 'Land of Lost Gods'

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'History is a gallery of pictures in which there are few originals and many copies.'
Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien régime* (1856)

Recently, historians' attention has turned to particular sites where the production of new forms of knowledge has taken place, whether medical theatres, laboratories, even estate houses, and indeed museums. Some philosophers and historians, notably Michel Foucault, and more recently the historian of medicine John Pickstone, have discussed how new forms of knowledge of the late eighteenth century can be related to the coeval development of what have been called 'museological' studies. Museological is a concept which refers in part to new analytical practices that developed at that time, including systems of taxonomy and classification, an encyclopaedic approach to the order of knowledge, the systematic display and comparison of the natural and artefactual world, and the comparison between ancient and modern societies. During the revolutionary decades, all these different activities overlapped with artistic and political narratives which defined the ostensible function of museums.

In this paper I'd like to discuss some of the ways that museological activities in France and Britain (in the Louvre and the British Museum) were aligned with the human sciences to offer new commentaries about the development and maintenance of civilisation—both ancient and modern. During what I partly anachronistically refer to as the 'revolutionary' decades—the 1790s to the 1810s (a reference I stick to because it falls in the middle of Eric Hobsbawm's 'Age of Revolution')—British and French commentators chose to represent ancient civilisation in such a way as to show that they were respectively the inheritors of the ancient principles of virtue, liberty, and democracy. Today, I sketch the apparent associations that were made between the civility of the ancients and the self-defined

civility of modern imperial rulers, the missionaries of the civilising process of the rest of the world.

The classicist tradition

Throughout the eighteenth century, both the French and the British developed strong cultural traditions in classicism and orientalism. The British élite created for themselves a heritage where being educated meant learning ancient languages and taking the Grand Tour to Italy or maybe Greece: a liberal education at the 'ancient universities' of Oxford and Cambridge was principally an education in the classics. Classicism also became a resource for justifying modern social and political structures. Ancient civilisation provided the principles upon which modern civilisation was founded and ruled by modern government. In the European contest over imperial domination in the late eighteenth century, the ancient lands were a profound focus: they were at once a territorial fighting ground and the *locus classicus* for defining the democratic and natural rights for different nations. Attention to the ancient lands, therefore, was manifest in a variety of ways, including historical accounts, literature, travel narratives, and antiquarian collections. One thinks of the influence of the controversial history of the *Decline of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon or Constantine Volney's *The Ruins*, which both invoked ruin imagery and the rational analysis of ancient civilisation as lessons for modern rule. What lessons were to be learned from the past in order to prevent the degeneration of modern civilisation? And how should they be taught?

These sorts of questions were directly implicated in the foundation of national museums in both France and Britain. The opening of an exhibition of paintings to the public at Luxembourg Palace in 1750 was virtually simultaneous with the founding of the British Museum open to the public in 1753. The democratic, encyclopaedic approach to the acquisition and classification of knowledge represented in the museums (including the Louvre which was opened to the public in 1793, which will further be discussed shortly) corresponded to the compilation of Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, published from 1751, and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which began publication in 1760. Museums were faced with questions and criticisms regarding how to communicate lessons of history

and morality for free to the public. For Diderot and the French *philosophes*, history as well as collections and works of art carried moral messages. These were frequently expositions on classical themes. Here we think of the series of paintings inspired by classical architecture and ruins that were prepared by the influential French landscape artist Hubert Robert for the replanning of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre. Or, in Britain, James Barry's paintings which portray the progressive stages of human culture displayed by the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce (in the 1780s). At the onset of the French Revolution, sentiments towards fallen empires and the progress of civilisation, coupled with anxiety over maintaining principles of modern rule and morality, were especially compounded.

The Louvre of the French Republic

The standard narrative in the history of the French Revolution informs us of the process by which political power in France was transformed into democratic social structures. What I would like to draw attention to is the pronouncements made about the democratisation of the arts, the ways in which the museum was thought to embody the principles of liberty and equality, and how the uses of classicism in the arts were transformed.

Seventeenth-century Royal Academies of painting and sculpture in France were essentially instruments of Royal power, and the work of the students was commissioned through aristocratic patronage and court society, a controlled relationship which reinforced the class-hierarchy, where artists, like artisans, were considered subjects under monarchical rule. If not displayed in private estates, works of art found a place in a Royal repository, off limits to the public. But in 1792, when the Bourbon monarchy collapsed and Louis XVI was taken prisoner, the new elective Assembly, the National Convention, declared a Republic. Soon after the establishment of a new political order and a new calendar, the Minister of the Interior, Jean-Marie Roland, wrote to the Republican *ideologue* Jacques-Louis David, explaining the importance of establishing a new museum for the Republic: 'This museum must demonstrate the nation's great riches ... the national museum will embrace knowledge in all its manifold beauty and will be the admiration of the universe. By embodying these

grand ideas, worthy of a free people, ... the museum will become among the most powerful illustrations of the French Republic.'

Under the new political order of the 1790s, art was to be produced freely and produced for the people; for many, the development of public museums would become central to the new political ideology. In 1793, the National Convention, led by the politically-active artist Jacques-Louis David, abolished the 'Royal' from the Académies, and, although maintaining their previous classical-educational principles, restructured them as an institute for public education (called the Ecole Spéciale de Peinture, Sculpture, et Architecture). As Armand-Guy Kersaint imagined when writing about the triumph of the new regime over the old regime, Paris, 'peopled by a race of men regenerated by liberty,' should succeed Rome as the 'capital of the arts.'

Representatives of the Third Estate viewed themselves as the producers of wealth which the other estates had squandered, and the Revolution redistributed the property. The museum was to embody the idea of collective ownership, of shared wealth (released from the clutches of the upper estates), of free access, expression, and freedom to display the fruits of their efforts. The citizen was to share a 'national character and the demeanour of a free man,' asserted Abbé Henri Grégoire. Soon after these declarations, the King was executed, the French Revolutionary government declared war with England and Holland, and a 'reign of terror' was inaugurated; but at last, also in 1793, the Louvre offered free and open access to the public. As the Louvre's catalogue for that year proudly stated, 'The form of arts, like the political system, must change; art should return to its first principle—to the imitation of nature, that unique model for which unfaithful copies have so long been substituted.' The new Minister of the Interior and *philosophe*, Dominique Garat, announced that the goal of artists should be 'to instruct men, inspire in them the love of goodness and to encourage them to live honourably.' The arts should stimulate the 'moral regeneration' of the nation.

However, during the terror, political and military factions within France fragmented Republican ideology. Dominique Garat had stated in July 1793 that the museum was intended to show 'to both the enemies as well

as the friends of our young Republic that the liberty we seek, founded on philosophic principles and the belief in progress, is not that of savages and barbarians.' The message was that the quest for civility, freedom, and equality should not be forgotten during times of revolution, terror, and war. The development of museum collections was intended to demonstrate this rationality. But, the following year, in June 1794, the official and systematic confiscation of art by French troops was authorised by the Committee on Public Instruction. This enabled General Napoleon Bonaparte, particularly after his later Italian exploits, to add considerably to the collections of the Louvre. However, while reaping these rewards, by adorning Paris with exotic cultural gifts, Napoleon's activities and collections also worked to refashion France's imperial image. He used the arts to express his own political ideology of conquest and rule, foreboding images for his 18th Brumaire coup in 1799 (year VIII).

Napoleon's war and artistic propaganda

Napoleon's ambitious military missions acquired collections which were used to fashion a new imperial identity for France. War booty and prizes from his campaigns were used as ornaments to his new imperial regime; classical portraits now provided images of historical precedence for Napoleon's dictatorship. [As one art historian has recognised,] 'Napoleon ensured that the institutions of art were freer than under the academic stranglehold of the Ancien Régime, but he imposed his will on them, and maintained the idea that major works should express the ideology of the ruler.' Napoleon's military campaigns were highly successful, and he made much of the 'trophies of conquest' that were won from these exploits.

Napoleon's Italian Campaign between 1796-7 had early on reaped notorious rewards. In 1798 a 'triumphal entry' festival celebrated the return of soldiers who proudly waved their tri-colour flags and hauled a wealth of new acquisitions to the Louvre. The public then found themselves in a skilfully organised gala in admiration of captured treasures from antiquity. The carnivalesque procession encouraged spectators to cheer not for their new rights and liberty, but to promote reverence for Napoleon's military prowess. One contemporary observer commented: 'The

national museum and its precious contents are recompense for the lives and blood of our fellow citizens spilled on the field of honour. French artists are worthy of this prize; they fully recognise its importance.' This description draws attention to a major shift in representations of civility: from freedom to domination, from creation to appropriation.

Napoleon had visions of grandeur. His ambitions were considered by some to undermine the spirit of moral regeneration and proper democratic rule. When Jacques-Louis David refused to join Napoleon on the Egyptian expedition in 1798, he did so with the lament: 'O well, I always did think that we weren't virtuous enough to be republicans.' The next year, he displayed his *Intervention of the Sabine Women*, a significant portrait which drew on the theme of reconciliation, appropos post 'reign of terror' sentiments. This painting is significant not only because of the association it made between the origins of ancient Rome and modern Paris, but because here David was clearly rethinking the principles of morality and virtue.

Napoleon's Egyptian Expedition and the antiquities he had sent to the Louvre represent that a change in Republican ideology had occurred. The mentality expressed from the beginning of the revolution in 1789, which led to the founding of a national museum as a temple to liberty and a symbol of redistribution of property, turned, with increasing military might and successive campaigns, into a repository for 'trophies of conquest.' The emphasis on accessibility, instruction, and cultivation of artistic freedom was replaced with an obsession for collecting tokens of memorable exploits as tributes to the French who had shed blood for the honour of their country.

When Napoleon attempted to conquer the east he likened himself to Alexander the Great, whose land and empire it had once been. By mid 1798, Napoleon's Egyptian Expedition had arrived in Alexandria. But the British were also present. By the end of the year, Admiral Nelson managed to overthrow the French fleet, forcing Napoleon to retreat. By 1801 the French regiment in Egypt had capitulated to the British and the Coalition (England, Austria, Russia, Turkey) imprisoned remaining French troops and began to reassign Italian territory. What arose within diplomatic negotiations at this—the imperial frontier—was a 'Great dispute' between

the British and the French regarding the antiquities and natural history collections made by the French. Compared to the territorial redistributions convening at the time, it seems squabbles over vestiges of ancient civilisation would be petty. Yet, it appears that the material appropriation of antiquities was highly symbolic.

The dispute concerned the 'law of prize,' the sixteenth article of the Capitulation of Alexandria which decreed that all natural history and antiquarian collections possessed by the French must be handed over to the British. One English traveller who was in Alexandria at this time and who was part of these negotiations was Edward Daniel Clarke. Clarke, a Cambridge 'tutor' who was rouding off a three-year tour of Europe, was anxious to offer his assistance to General Hutchinson to help procure any antiquity that could potentially be relocated either to Cambridge University or the British Museum, 'as I know full well,' Clarke commented, 'we have better Orientalists than the French.' Hutchinson sent Clarke, along with members of the Society of Antiquaries (of London), to negotiate with the French. One of the high priority objects that Clarke and his compatriots were trying to procure was the Rosetta Stone.

When the British sought to find out what 'national property' was in the hands of the French, one might ask to whose nation this referred. It might refer to the victors' nation, who by wartime rights could claim territory and all in it. But because many of the objects in question were relics of an ancient civilisation and an empire that had crumbled, possessions from an *ancient* nation symbolically represented the new property and the revived power of a modern imperial state.

It was at this point, when the French and the British met in the ancient lands and debated ownership of the collections, that we begin to see how the British defined their own interests (political and other) in collecting and classicism. In considering the British perspective, we not only see arguments about the acquisitions of collections for the British Museum, but we can see another way that museology became strongly associated with imperialist discourse.

Reformation of classicism in Britain

If Paris fashioned itself a modern Rome, London was to be the modern Athens. After Napoleon's defeat, the British government cleverly appropriated the language of artistic and personal freedoms to legitimise their pursuits in the east and de-moralise French aggression. In establishing their new imperial identity, Britons also searched for ways to root themselves historically within a tradition of imperial reconstruction. In similar ways to how the French Republic had fashioned an imperial identity by attempting to root themselves historically within a Roman ancestry of democracy and liberty, interests and scholarship regarding ancient civilisation also flourished in Britain. For elite Britons, the pinnacle of classical studies was visiting Greece, about which fashionable society was becoming increasingly familiar through travel narratives and antiquarian collections.

The venture of collecting Greek antiquities was writ large by the British Ambassador at Constantinople, Lord Elgin. After taking up his position in 1799, he assembled a team of artists with the intention of illustrating and producing plaster casts of Athenian architecture. Already resident in Athens for the past seventeen years was the French artist Louis François Sébastien Fauvel, an agent to the French Ambassador in Constantinople, working on his own casts of the acropolis. When Napoleon was defeated, however, so were the efforts of the French artists. In 1801, Elgin's agents moved in, and with unprecedented 'permission' from the Turkish authorities, began their own work on the acropolis. Rather than illustrating and sculpting the marbles, however, they began to dismantle the friezes of the Parthenon and surrounding monuments and ship the originals back to London.

In 1807, Elgin himself having finally returned to London, put his marbles on semi-public display in a 'shed' he had built at his Mayfair mansion. In 1815 the marbles were the subject of discussion by a Parliamentary Select Committee regarding their potential purchase 'for the nation.' After listening to the testimony of a series of travellers, artists, architects and dealers on the value of the marbles, a price of £35,000 was offered to Elgin for transferring ownership and placing them in the British Museum. Elgin begrudgingly accepted this offer, complaining that his expenses in removing the statues came to double that amount. Besides

that, he believed that the marbles demanded a higher estimation of value given their superiority to any French collection. He even paid Ennio Visconti, an Italian antiquary who in 1814 was working as a museum curator for Napoleon, to offer his own assessment. Elgin hoped that Visconti, who he called 'the best judge in Europe,' would convince the British government 'that the collection is highly desirable, and consider'd so by such authorities, as are conversant with Bonaparte's Collection'

The British valuers, however, had their own criteria to determine the value of the collection. For them, the 'value' depended not on the costs and problems of transport from Greece, Egypt, or Constantinople to England, but on the potential *benefit* that the marbles could have for aspiring British neo-classical artists: the effect that these marbles would have on judgement and taste. The debates surrounding the publicity of the Elgin Marbles in England had to do with issues ranging from legitimising the seemingly imperial act of 'raping' the 'land of lost Gods and men' of their material possessions to how aesthetically pleasing they were relative to other art forms. Although, other commentators rather sarcastically remarked that the sheer benefit of the Elgin marbles had to be their public accessibility, 'so that the traveller who has in vain looked for them in Greece might at last find them in England!'

The artists who testified to the Select Committee argued that London should house the sculptures to demonstrate Britain's commitment to preserve the integrity of the pursuit of the arts. The reason why Greece produced such extraordinary art in the ancient world, it was argued in 1816, was because it was promoted within a free government. The Report of the Select Committee stated that 'if it be true, as we learn from history and experience, that free governments afford soil most suitable to the production of native talent, ... no country can be better adapted than our own to afford an honourable asylum to these monuments of the school of Phidias' In London, as in ancient Greece, the arts should flourish under a free government; they should not be subjected to the tyranny of French (or their associated predecessors, Roman) rule. Of course, 'free government' was a concept that was also meant to include liberal patronage for the artistic community. Money spent on marbles was also money for those to look after them and promote their presence.

The idea that the British government would demonstrate principles of liberty by buying Elgin's marbles and therefore supporting the pursuit of the arts was a notion imported from the eighteenth-century German art critic Johann Winckelmann. In his *History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks*, Winckelmann proposed that '[t]he independence of Greece is to be regarded as the most prominent of the causes, originating in its constitution and government, of its superiority in art.' Having the Greek marbles in London, the new symbolic centre for freedom and the promotion of art, would enable British artists to have an established guide with which to evaluate their own art.

Indeed, it was this line of reasoning that another British traveller to Greece, John Cam Hobhouse, used to argue in favour of the removal of Greek antiquities to Britain. In the first volume of his published travel narrative, he emphasised in a long footnote his belief that the removal of the Greek marbles would benefit 'an infinitely greater number of [British] architects and sculptors,' if they were in Britain rather than Greece and certainly France. Not every British artist could make the Grand Tour, and having the sculptures in Britain would accommodate their interests. But others strongly disagreed, including Hobhouse's travelling companion, Lord Byron, who declared: 'I oppose, and will ever oppose, the robbery of ruins from Athens, to instruct the English in sculpture (who are as capable of sculpture as the Egyptians are of skating).' Looking briefly at Byron's response to the appropriation of Greek antiquities reveals ways that the language of 'free government,' rescuing the past from imperial tyranny and conquest by the French, could also be exposed as nothing short of Britain's own desire to symbolically dominate the past.

When Byron returned from his pilgrimage to Greece in 1811, he had no intention of suppressing his opinions about the activities of the other Britons who had been resident in Athens for the past decade. On his journey home from Greece on board the *Hydra*, Byron, along with Hobhouse, sat amongst the last crates packed by Lord Elgin's agents which contained the last shipment of the marbles. Not long after stepping off the boat in England, Byron penned a harsh letter to Elgin to say 'I knew all about his robberies, & at last have written to say that ... it is my intention to publish (in

Childe Harold) on that topic' *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the first two cantos of which were published in 1812, was Byron's metaphoric account of his travels in Greece. The poem poignantly conveyed his attitude concerning the collecting habits of the British elite and the national interest in the neo-classical movement.

His poem represents one of the first public displays of his life-long interest in Greek independence, and presents a glimpse of his anti-imperialist demeanour and radical politics. However, in the context of early nineteenth-century literary production, Byron's was only one of many contributions to the discourse about the 'anxieties and insecurities' of imperial policy. Having been a student at Trinity College, Cambridge, Byron could be nothing but acutely aware of the cultural significance that representing the far shores of the Mediterranean could have. I mention Byron's criticism here to suggest not only the diversity of media through which themes of classicism and imperialism were expressed, but to point out the diversity of opinion of such endeavours. Byron remained one of the most outspoken critics of the neo-classicist movement in Britain, aligning opposition to the appropriation of ancient artefacts with opposition to imperial programmes. In the midst of national concerns over economy, trade, population, and agricultural production, spending £35,000 on marbles was to many an incomprehensible investment, as political satirists were keen to show. This illustration, for example, depicts Lord Elgin as John Bull, 'buying stones at the time his numerous family want Bread.' Elgin's speculation made stones more valuable than bread, emphasising the perceived instability of the national economy, confounded by interests in the past taking precedence over concerns for the present.

So in these changing attitudes toward classicism, collecting, and museum building, what message might be teased out? That the Elgin Marbles were indeed purchased or that Napoleon—even after his defeat—returned to Paris to a triumphal entry festival—is telling of the relationship between politics and art, particularly during periods of political revolution and political turmoil. Moments of social and political crises tend to alter the activities of ordering knowledge and social relations that were taken for granted in both France and Britain. That travel writers and classical scholars developed keen interest in the antiquities that were brought from

the ancient lands tells us much about how early nineteenth-century commentators used museums to create historical and imperial narratives. Forming collections for the national estate—for the Louvre or the British Museum—were ways of fashioning a cultural identity that was highly politically charged. On the one hand it seems that the uses of such collections meant whether or not the public could have examples of what was deemed tasteful art and the freedom to enjoy national treasures. On the other hand, the implication of such endeavours could also be turned in to nothing less than an endorsement for conquest and imperial expansion, as I think critiques of Napoleon's campaign or the acquisition of the Elgin marbles, suggests.

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