In Context

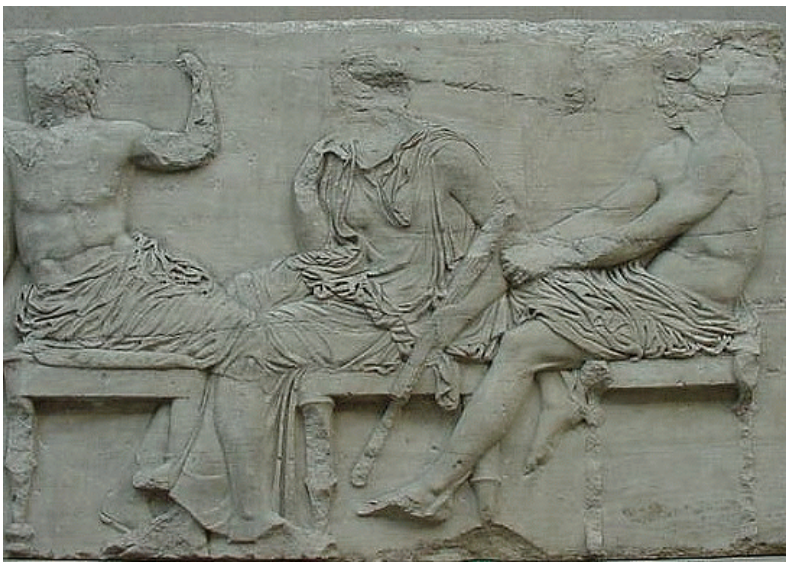
The Elgin Marbles

The sculpted works now known as the Elgin Marbles are among the most impressive artefacts of ancient Greek civilization. They were removed from the Acropolis in Athens by a British group under the direction of Thomas Bruce, seventh Earl of Elgin, in the early years of the nineteenth century. At the time Athens was under the control of the Ottoman Empire, which had granted Elgin the right to erect scaffolding, make drawings and moulds of friezes and other sculptures, and excavate as appropriate. It is not clear that Elgin was ever granted permission to permanently remove and transport to Britain a large number of sculptures, as eventually happened. In 1816 most of the works were sold to the British government, and they remain in the British Museum in London.

The removal of the Elgin Marbles is still contentious (the Greek government continues to demand their return from Britain), but for Keats, Hazlitt, and other literary figures of the time, the aesthetic issues raised by the marbles were of more intense interest than the political ones. Greek sculpture of this sort was championed as an ideal expression of art imitating nature—in contrast to what were seen as the derivative principles of neoclassical painting and sculpture. Just as Leigh Hunt attacked the neoclassical poetic tradition of Alexander Pope and others and contrasted it with the newer tradition of poets "who go directly to Nature for inspiration," so Hazlitt attacked Sir Joshua Reynolds (first president of the Royal Academy of Art) and other neoclassical artists, contrasting their approach to art with that exemplified by the Elgin Marbles.

The Elgin Marbles continued to exert a powerful influence on British aesthetic sensibility throughout the nineteenth century. The Victorian painter G.F. Watts recommended that artists study the Elgin Marbles to improve their figure drawing, and photographer Julia Margaret Cameron had models sit for her in poses based on those of figures in some of the sculptures.

Julia Margaret Cameron, *Teachings from the Elgin Marbles*, 1867.



The Elgin Marbles (detail).

from William Hazlitt, "Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses" (*Champion*, 27 November 1814)

… We shall state at once, and without further preface, the principal points in the Discourses which we deem either wrong in themselves, or liable to misconception and abuse. They are the following—

1. That genius or invention consists chiefly in borrowing the ideas of others, or in using other men's minds.
2. That the great style in painting depends on leaving out the details of particular objects.
3. That the essence of portrait consists in giving the general character, rather than the individual likeness.
4. That the essence of history consists in abstracting from individuality as much as possible.
5. That beauty or ideal perfection consists in a central form.
6. That to imitate nature is a very inferior object in art.

All of these positions appear to require a separate consideration, which we shall give them in the following articles on this subject.

from William Hazlitt, "Report on the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Elgin Marbles" (*Examiner,* 11 June 1816)

The Elgin Marbles are the best answer to Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses. Considered in that point of view, they are invaluable: in any other, they are not worth so much as has been said. Nothing remains of them but their style; but that is everything, for it is the style of nature. Art is the imitation of nature; and the Elgin Marbles are in their essence and their perfection casts from nature—from fine nature, it is true, but from real, living, moving nature; from objects in nature, answering to an idea in the artist's mind, not from an idea in the artist's mind abstracted from all objects in nature. Already these marbles have produced a revolution in our artists' minds … It is to be hoped, however, that these marbles with the name of Phidias[1] thrown into the scale of common sense, may lift the fine arts out of the limbo of vanity and affectation into which they were conjured in this country about fifty years ago, and in which they have lain sprawling and fluttering, gasping for breath, wasting away, vapid and abortive ever since—the shadow of a shade. The benefit of high examples of Art is to prevent the mischievous effect of bad ones. A true theory of Art does not advance the student one step in practice, one hair's-breadth nearer the goal of excellence: but it takes the fetters from off his feet, and loosens the bandages from his eyes. …

from William Hazlitt, "On the Elgin Marbles" (*The London Magazine*, February 1822)

… It is evident to any one who views these admirable remains of Antiquity (nay, it is acknowledged by our artists themselves, in despite of all the melancholy sophistry which they have been taught or have been teaching others for half a century) that the chief excellence of the figures depends on their having been copied from nature, and not from imagination. The communication of art with nature is here everywhere immediate, entire, palpable. The artist gives himself no fastidious airs of superiority over what he sees. He has not arrived at that stage of his progress described at much length in Sir

[1] *Phidias* Fifth-century Athenian sculptor of the Elgin Marbles.

Joshua Reynolds's Discourses, in which, having served out his apprenticeship to nature, he can set up for himself in opposition to her. According to the old Greek form of drawing up the indentures in this case, we apprehend they were to last for life. At least, we can compare these Marbles to nothing but human figures petrified; they are absolute facsimiles or casts taken from nature. The details are those of nature; the masses are those of nature; the forms are from nature; the action is from nature; the whole is from nature. … The learned, however, here make a distinction, and suppose that the truth of nature is, in the Elgin Marbles, combined with ideal forms. If by *ideal forms* they mean fine natural forms, we have nothing to object; but if they mean that the sculptors of the Theseus and the Ilissus[1] got the forms out of their own heads, and then tacked the truth of nature to them, we can only say, "Let them look again, let them look again." We consider the Elgin Marbles as a demonstration of the impossibility of separating art from nature, without a proportionable loss at every remove. The utter absence of all setness of appearance shows that they were done as studies from actual models. The separate parts of the human body may be given from scientific knowledge; their modifications or inflections can only be learnt by seeing them in action; and the truth of nature is incompatible with ideal form, if the latter is meant to exclude actually existing form. …

That truth of nature and ideal, or fine, form are not always or generally united, we know; but how they can ever be united in art, without being first united in nature, is to us a mystery, and one that we as little believe as understand. …

If then the Elgin Marbles are to be considered as authority in subjects of art, we conceive the following principles, which have not hitherto been generally received or acted upon in Great Britain, will be found to result from them:

1. That art is (first and last) the imitation of nature.

2. That the highest art is the imitation of the finest nature, that is to say, of that which conveys the strongest sense of pleasure or power, of the sublime or beautiful.

3. That the *ideal* is only the selecting a particular form which expresses most completely the idea of a given character or quality, as of beauty, strength, activity, voluptuousness, &c. and which preserves that character with the greatest consistency throughout.

4. That the *historical* is nature in action. With regard to the face, it is expression.

5. That grandeur consists in connecting a number of parts into a whole, and not in leaving out the parts.

6. That as grandeur is the principle of connection between different parts, beauty is the principle of affinity between different forms, or rather gradual conversion into each other. The one harmonises, the other aggrandizes our impressions of things.

7. That grace is the beautiful or harmonious in what relates to position or motion.

8. That grandeur of motion is unity of motion.

9. That strength is the giving of extremes; softness, the uniting them.

10. That truth is to a certain degree beauty and grandeur; since all things are connected, and all things modify one another in nature. Simplicity is also grand and beautiful for the same reason. Elegance is ease and lightness, with precision.

[1] *Theseus … Ilissus* Two of the Elgin Marbles sculptures.

from B.R. Haydon,[1] "On the Judgement of Connoisseurs Being Preferred to that of Professional Men—Elgin Marbles, &c" (*Examiner*, 17 March 1816)

The various characters of harmony must be left to the artist's own choice and selection, and an ideal form must never be executed without the curb of *perpetual* and *immediate* reference to nature.

It is this union of nature with ideal beauty, the probabilities and accidents of flesh, bone, and tendon, from extension, flexion, compression, gravitation, action or repose, that ranks at once the Elgin Marbles above all other works of art in the world. The finest form that man ever imagined, or God ever created, must have been formed on this eternal principle. The Elgin Marbles will as completely overthrow the old antique, as ever one system of philosophy overthrew another more enlightened: were they lost, there would be as great a gap in knowledge of art as there would have been in philosophy if Newton had never existed. This is truth, and truth it can be proved; and let him who doubts it study them, as I have done, for eight years daily, and he will doubt it no longer. They have thrown at once into light principles which would only have been discovered by successive geniuses (as in Greece), if ever at all; because we *had* what the Greeks had not, an *antique* and a *system* to *mislead* us, and misplaced veneration and early habits to root out. …

Every truth of shape, the result of the inherent organization of man as an intellectual being; every variation of that shape, produced by the slightest variation of intention acting on it; every result of repose, on flesh as a soft substance, and on bone as a hard, both being influenced by the common principles of life and gravitation; every harmony of line in composition from geometric principles—all of which prove the science of the artist—every beauty of conception proving his genius; and every grace of execution showing that practice had given power to his hand, can be proved to exist in the Elgin Marbles. …

I should consider myself a traitor to my Art and my country's taste, and the dignity of my pursuit, if I suffered them [the Elgin Marbles] to pass unnoticed. To these divine things I owe every principle of art I may possess. I never enter among them without bowing to the Great Spirit that reigns within them. I thank God daily that I was in existence on their arrival, and will continue to do so to the end of my life. Such a blast will Fame blow of their grandeur, that its roaring will swell out as time advances; and nations now sunk in barbarism, and ages yet unborn, will in succession be roused by their thunder, and be refined by their harmony. Pilgrims from the remotest corners of the earth will visit their shrine, and be purified by their beauty.

[1] *B.R. Haydon* Young historical painter Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1846), one of the staunchest defenders of Elgin's removal of the Marbles to England.

In Context

The Death of Keats

Keats's friend Joseph Severn had accompanied him to Italy in September of 1820, and was with him when he died of tuberculosis on 23 February 1821.

Joseph Severn to Charles Brown

27 February 1821
Rome

My Dear Brown,

He is gone—he died with the most perfect ease—he seemed to go to sleep. On the 23rd, about 4, the approaches of death came on. "Severn—I—lift me up—I am dying—I shall die easy—don't be frightened—be firm, and thank God it has come!" I lifted him up in my arms. The phlegm seemed boiling in his throat, and increased until 11, when he gradually sunk into death—so quiet—that I still thought he slept. I cannot say now—I am broken down from four nights' watching, and no sleep since, and my poor Keats gone. Three days since, the body was opened; the lungs were completely gone. The Doctors could not conceive by what means he had lived these two months. I followed his poor body to the grave on Monday, with many English. They take such care of me here—that I must, else, have gone into a fever. I am better now—but still quite disabled.

The police have been. The furniture, the walls, the floor, everything must be destroyed by order of the law. But this is well looked to by Dr. C.

The letters I put into the coffin with my own hand.

I must leave off.