

Upstairs Case 12

The Elgin Marbles and the Parthenon Frieze

Elgin Marbles Miniatures

In November 2003, Elgin Museum received a telephone call from a local woman who claimed to have something in her attic that may have once belonged to the museum, and she would like us to have it back.

Underneath an old issue of the Scottish Daily Express, dated 11th December 1936, was a superb set of miniatures of the Elgin Marbles, from the Parthenon frieze. The associated paperwork confirmed the fact that the miniatures were originally a gift to Elgin Museum from Louisa Countess of Seafield, in November 1886.

How, why, or when these miniatures disappeared from the museum is unknown, nevertheless some 112 years after they were gifted, they are now again available for display.

The Parthenon

The Parthenon, built on the (upper city) in Athens, Greece, nearly 2,500 years ago, is a marble temple to commemorate the Greek Goddess Athena. She was a Goddess of Wisdom and a Warrior Goddess, who sprang from the head of her father, Zeus, fully armed with helmet, shield and spear.

Each year Athena's Birthday was celebrated at the festival of the Panathenaia, to mark the beginning of the Athenian year.

The procession of the Peplos, a new garment for Athena, which took nine months to weave, was reserved for the Greater Panathenaia every 4th year; this procession is depicted on part of the frieze or wall crown from the Parthenon.

Much of the frieze is devoted to scenes from Greek mythology – battles between Centaurs and Lapiths, Greeks and Amazons (female warriors from modern day Ukraine) and a battle between Athena and Poseidon, to determine who should be the patron of Athens. There are also chariot races and women carrying ritual items. Represented are 360 humans, divine figures, and over 200 animals, the majority of which are horses. In 1687, much of the Parthenon was destroyed during use as a gunpowder store. Many Metopes (sculptures) included in the frieze had been damaged throughout history but were now suffering further ongoing damage and piecemeal sale.

Lord Elgin (1766 - 1841) and the 'Elgin Marbles'

In 1799, British Diplomatist and art collector, Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin (and 11th Earl of Kincardine), was appointed British Ambassador in Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, which then included most of Greece.

Concerned about damage to important artworks in temples in Greece, Lord Elgin obtained full permission from the Turkish authorities to remove 15 of the original 92 marble metopes from the Parthenon frieze to transport to London. In time, request was granted to "*take away any pieces of stone with old inscriptions of figures thereon*". Those which were not removed were drawn and moulded and provide evidence for sculptures which have since perished.

Although no money was actually paid for the sculptures, which became known as the 'Elgin Marbles', the expense of obtaining permits and their transportation by Lord Elgin amounted to £75,000.

A series of shipments took sculptures to England between 1802-1812; in 1804, these sculptures survived the sinking of HMS 'Mentor' off the Greek island of Cythera – the entire cargo was recovered. After much controversy over the sculptures' removal from Greece, the entire collection was acquired from Lord Elgin by the crown for the sum of £35,000 to the care of The British Museum, where, controversially, they remain.

A full account of the whole affair can be found in the Journal of Hellenic studies, volume XXXVI (1916), under the title 'Lord Elgin and his Collection', by A.H. Smith.

The Parthenon Frieze Miniatures

John Henning (1771-1851)

In the 18th and 19th centuries, classical sculpture was so popular that the trade in plaster casts of sculptures developed. The casts were exhibited in country houses as decoration and for study in cabinets of curiosities.

John Henning, a Scottish sculptor from Paisley was one of the first artists to gain access to the 'Elgin Marbles', which were displayed in a makeshift museum on the corner of Park Lane and Piccadilly in London. Henning was so struck by the beauty of the sculptures that he asked to draw and make models of them. Henning first sculpted miniature replicas in ivory but this proved unsatisfactory.

Using earlier drawings to help him work out the order of the procession depicted, Henning carved miniature sunken impressions in slate, from which raised casts were made in white plaster and sold in boxed sets. As we understand, there are possibly only four sets of these original Henning casts in existence; it is a set of these 2"x 6" casts, originally owned by Louisa, Countess Seafield, that are on display here.
ELGNM: 2003.35

Sketches of the 'Elgin Marbles'

Also exhibited are two of John Henning's original detailed pencil drawings of the 'Elgin Marbles' showing the power and beauty of the horses in the original sculptures.

The two pencil drawings here, were first loaned to Elgin Museum in 2004 and later very kindly donated to Elgin Museum (in May 2014) by Andrew Douglas Alexander Thomas Bruce, 11th Earl of Elgin and 15th Earl of Kincardine, KT, CD, JP, DL.

Fochabers Framers and Elgin Arts sponsored the framing of the drawings in 2004.

ELGNM: 2004.2

Appendix 1

Why Lord 'Elgin'?

Why did a British diplomat whose main residence was Broom Hall in Fife, have the title 'Earl of Elgin'?

For a closer geographical link, we can go to Kinloss Abbey, ten miles west of Elgin. In 1583, Edward Bruce, the father of the 1st Earl, was parson of Torie in Fife and associated with the abbey at Kinloss. He became Abbot, then later Lord Bruce of Kinloss 1604.

It was Edward Bruce's third son, Thomas, who became 1st Earl of Elgin, in 1633. This gift of Earldom from King Charles I was a reward to Thomas for contributing to the pomp of Charles' coronation in Scotland and for rescuing Charles when his boat capsized on the crossing from Burntisland to Leith.

As all the cities and counties around Bruce country in the upper Forth had already been used for titles, friends in Scotland suggested to Thomas 'Elgin', the great cathedral city, which was close to his considerable land holdings of Kinloss. As Thomas, who mostly lived in England said, 'the English will be able to pronounce it'!