

The Real Life of the Parthenon

Patricia Vigderman

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Patricia Vigderman's *The Real Life of the Parthenon* uses Grecian sites as vehicles to explore the meaning that historical artifacts bring to their nations of origin and to the foreign lands that lay claim to them.

Growing up in Greece against a backdrop of ancient ruins rich with myth and history, Vigderman knew the affront created by British Lord Elgin's removal of the majestic, though broken, sculptures that once graced the Parthenon. Now housed in the British Museum, they have become associated with "*British* pride and excellence and aspirations," she writes.

Are museums complicit with tomb robbers and a greedy antiquities market? The discussion can become inflammatory, as rival claims to ownership entwine past and present into national myths even as the pillaging and looting of colonialism are brought to light.

"Money, power, and beauty snarl into complex arguments," writes Vigderman, who thoughtfully questions and probes the issues rather than making judgments for either side. Her explorations take her to ruined temples, archeological excavations, and museums in Athens, Naples, Pompeii, Sicily, New York, and Los Angeles.

She ponders the difference between unlawful plunder and "collecting" for the good of culture as a whole, noting that the distinction can be blurred by time and by the need to justify the actions of one nation toward another. Although some venerable institutions that hold ancient objects are now in the process of returning them to their home cultures, other artifacts, like those taken from the Parthenon, remain in foreign hands.

Patricia Vigderman turns her deep, wide knowledge of culture and artifacts to a discussion that's too long lacked honesty, clarity of vision, and compassion.

KRISTINE MORRIS (January/February 2018)

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