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Acquisition as Appropriation: From the Parthenon to the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim

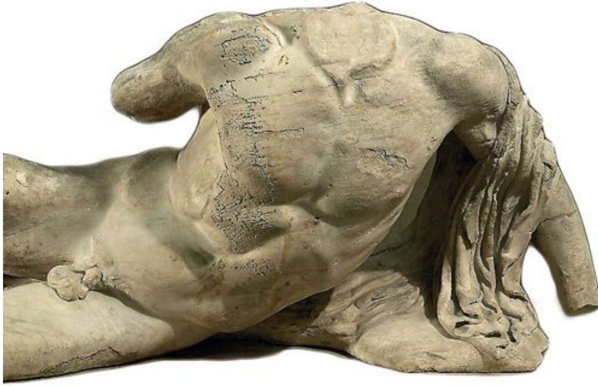
Ilissos

On 4 December 2014 the *New York Times* featured two very different articles about works of art moving around the world. The first, Carol Vogel's "A New Art Capital Finding Its Own Voice," announced Abu Dhabi's leap into the transnational art world and described the government's financing of three major museums projected to join NYU Abu Dhabi on Saadiyat Island by 2017: branches of the Louvre and the Guggenheim as well as Zayed National Museum (created in partnership with the British Museum).[1] The second article, Steven Erlanger's "Greek Statue Travels Again, but Not to Greece," described the first loan in two centuries of one of the British Museum's Parthenon Marbles (a representation of the River God Ilissos) to the Hermitage in Russia, infuriating Greek officials who argue that Lord Elgin removed the marbles illegally in 1811. British Museum director Neil MacGregor responded to the flare-up of this controversy by arguing it was all in a spirit of diplomacy: Ilissos, a headless, reclining, male nude, was chosen partly because he was in a robust state to travel but also because he "represents the stream where Plato and Socrates walked to talk of beauty, love and a good society." The exchange, MacGregor said, "fitted into the world of sculpture and Greek philosophy. It wrote itself as an expression of friendship between the two institutions."[2]

Turning Ilissos from a two-hundred-year-old prisoner-of-war into a modern-day cultural ambassador is—to say the least—a bold move; however, it's a move worth thinking about, especially against the backdrop of a country such as Abu

[1] Carol Vogel, "A New Art Capital Finding Its Own Voice," *New York Times*, 4 December 2014.

[2] Sarah Sands, "Keeping our Marbles: Neil MacGregor on why Lord Elgin's rescued sculptures are the perfect tool for global diplomacy," *Evening Standard*, 12 December 2014.



Statue of Ilissos from the west pediment of the Parthenon.[3]

Dhabi, which is fast becoming a player on the world's economic stage. As Yassar Elsheshtawy points out in his study of Abu Dhabi's urban strategies, it is "the notion of Abu Dhabi becoming a 'new' cultural center in the Middle East" that has justified the enormous resources required to turn Saadiyat Island into a hub for art and culture from the west.[4] Elsheshtawy refers to writers and journalists who suggest the motivation for bringing western institutions and projects to the island is that they will not only "provide a counterpoint to fundamentalist tendencies", but also that architecture and art will reshape the national identity, "educate and enlighten local citizens, instill a sense of national pride and provide local society with the necessary tools for global engagement."[5]

We need look no further than the eighteenth and nineteenth century European Grand Tour for a kind of global engagement that treated old heritage objects as cultural capital to be bought (or stolen), managed, packaged, and even sent on missions of exchange. For imperial powers, acquiring and displaying material

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[3] Vusiem Visitor Guides, http://www.vusiem.com/apps/86-statue-of-ilissos-from-the-west-pediment-of-parthenon-vusiem-british-museum-app-ios-android/.

[4] Yasser Elsheshtawy, "The Production of Culture: Abu Dhabi's Urban Strategies," in *Metropolitan Cultural Politics, Policies, and Governance*, ed. Helmut Anheier and Yudhishthir Raj Isar (London: Sage Publications, 2012), 138-9.

[5] Elsheshtawy, "The Production of Culture," 139.

culture sent out strong signals of dominance, power, and elitism. As E. M. Forster points out in his 1920 essay, “For the Museum’s Sake”:

> After the Treaty of Vienna every progressive government felt it a duty to amass old objects, and to exhibit a fraction of them in a building called a Museum, which was occasionally open free. “National possessions” they were now called, and it was important that they should outnumber the objects possessed by other nations, and should be genuine old objects, and not imitations, which looked the same, but were said to be discreditable. […] The various governments passed laws restricting exportation, and instructed their custom officials accordingly; and they also hired experts to buy for them and to intrigue against other experts.[6]

In Vogel’s aforementioned article, Zaki Anwar Nusseibeh, cultural adviser for the Emirates’ Ministry of Presidential Affairs, is not so cynical about the nature of such a “Museum” on Abu Dhabi soil, pointing merely to the value that Abu Dhabi places on educating its citizens about art and culture: “We know we cannot create culture overnight, so we are strategically building museums that in time will train our own people, so we can find our own voice. Hopefully, in 20 or 30 years’ time, we will have our own cultural elite, so our young people won’t have to go to London or Paris to learn about art.”[7] But what will be the true demographic of the Abu Dhabi Louvre’s future guests? Probably young Emirati citizens will head first to those areas of the museum that promise to be dedicated to the promotion of regional culture and history. Then, perhaps, they will join tourists who come to one more cosmopolitan capital in order to admire the (literal) trappings of the world’s past on display—both local objects as well as artefacts culled from the collections of the west. For his part, Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras would clearly rather have the Emirati youth and the world’s tourists head to Greece to see its art *in situ*, rather than ogling ancient antiquities in London, Paris, or Abu Dhabi as part of a process of assimilating culture. Expressing outrage that Ilissos was headed to Russia first instead of Greece, Samaras proclaimed, “We Greeks are one with our history and

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[6] E. M. Forster, “For the Museum’s Sake”, in *Abinger Harvest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1946), 278-9.

[7] Vogel, “A New Art Capital Finding Its Own Voice.”

civilization, which cannot be broken up, loaned out, or given away!"[8] Implicit in his outrage is the notion that museums and their collections are powerful not necessarily because of what they contain (lauding the detritus of the past is by no means universal across cultures), but for the psychological, institutional, and international power represented by the ability to frame and curate history and civilization.

Considering the words of Nusseibeh and Samaras in parallel is striking on many levels. Almost half a century after the founding of the U.A.E.—with rapid economic growth and a population reported to be 15% Emirati and 85% expatriate—Nusseibeh's words underscore how difficult it is to identify authentic Abu Dhabi culture in its modern setting. Whereas Greece enjoys a recorded history that dates back to the days of Herodotus, the U.A.E. was not unified as a country of seven Emirates until 1971 under the leadership of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. Prior to that, the country was largely composed of Bedouin communities. Thus, Abu Dhabi was literally born on shifting sands; formerly a semi-nomadic culture with a rich oral tradition, its approach to development has been to leverage the expertise of individuals and companies from other countries. This has resulted in vast systems of infrastructure throughout the country, including power, water, urban development projects, architecture, aviation, hospitality, medicine, and museums. Educational institutions have also opened new campuses in Abu Dhabi, including Cranleigh School, Brighton College, the Sorbonne, and New York University. Nusseibeh's projection of a cultural elite formed in only "20 or 30 years' time" inevitably invites the kinds of questions that initially inspired the thinking in this essay: What exactly constitutes a national "cultural elite" if culture is linked to the curation of art and artefacts by the parent museums of former colonial powers? Towards what end has the country invited the three major colonial powers of the past two-hundred years—France, England, and the United States—to plant their flags in the form of museums, secondary schools, and universities on Saadiyat Island, which is the projected epicentre of art and culture in Abu Dhabi? Finally, does the means of acquisition make a difference (i.e. using economic might

[8] Steven Erlanger, "Greek Statue Travels Again, but Not to Greece," *New York Times*, 4 December 2014.

rather than looting and plundering) when it comes to exercising the power to remove art and artefacts from their original homes?

Britannia

In 1998, writer and politician Nigel Nicolson, the son of Vita Sackville-West, wrote a review of Theodore Vrettos's *The Elgin Affair*, which describes Lord Elgin's abduction of the Parthenon marbles from Athens. Nicolson begins with a quick description of his own recent visit to the Acropolis and places himself literally on the site of the longstanding controversy about the plunder and restitution of the Parthenon marbles—a controversy that not only symbolizes the history of British imperialism as it intersects with British Hellenism, but also gives us a framework to think about cultural appropriation today. In the opening lines of his review, Nicolson describes standing on the Acropolis in the summer of 1996, listening to the Greek guide's lecture on the glories of the Parthenon.[9] The guide, he says, "tactfully avoided comment on the removal of its sculptures by Lord Elgin in 1800-3, apart from appealing to her audience (mainly British) to call them the 'Parthenon marbles,' not the 'Elgin marbles.'" He then goes on to counter the guide's final declaration to the British tourists that "Yes, we want [the marbles] back":

> The arguments for returning the sculptures from London to Athens have many times been rehearsed, […] Lord Byron led the way in his poem "Childe Harold," followed by the eloquent Melina Mercouri when she was Green Minister of Culture in the 1980's. Both accused Elgin of vandalism—but wrongly, for vandalism implies destruction and the sculptures have been better protected against neglect and weather than they would have been if they had remained high up on the Parthenon's walls.

Nicolson applauds Vrettos's "excellent book" for being "free from prejudice and remarkably sympathetic to Lord Elgin" and for quoting "at length the arguments for and against restitution" without coming down firmly on either side. His assertion that Elgin "not only wished to save the marbles but to exhibit them as

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[9] Nigel Nicolson, "Losing Their Marbles," *New York Times*, 4 January 1998.

British Penny, 1920[10]

an inspiration to the British," resonates with the U.A.E.'s cultural adviser's explanation that the collections in the Saadiyat museums will serve to inspire a love of art and culture in the next generation of Emiratis. Nicolson touches on the question of wealth as well, implying that precious cultural artefacts should belong to the nation that can give them the safest home: he argues in favour of the "excellent conditions in which [the marbles] are displayed in London," and questions "the plans the Greeks have made to receive the marbles if they are restored to them." Finally, he paves the way for a new kind of cultural currency that is fast becoming intuitive to those who live in Abu Dhabi: the currency of cosmopolitanism. For example, when he worries that restoring the marbles to Greece would set a precedent ("every nation would lay claim to its 'abducted' treasures" and "the Metropolitan and the British Museum would be stripped") we can assume he would approve of the notion of museums as cultural enclaves that neatly sidestep the need for old-fashioned restitution. The parent museums of the Louvre and Guggenheim can safely send out artefacts like envoys to their French and American embassy-museums on Saadiyat. No matter if the Abu Dhabi Louvre collection will include artefacts from other Middle Eastern countries, such as a Pyramidion of Amenhotep-Huy (1335-1295 B.C.E.), or a bronze statuette of the God Osiris (1085-738 B.C.E), or a mummy bandage from the late fourth century B.C.E.—just a few of the 300 works listed as part of the museum's growing collection.[11] Such objects are branded and curated by the

[10] https://24carat.co.uk/frame.php?url=1920penny.html.

[11] See Laurence Des Cars, *Louvre Abu Dhabi: Birth of a Museum* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014).

west. They return to the Middle East like second- or third-generation refugees, illuminated differently and out of context.

But of course this sort of thing has been written about already in a similar historical moment of economic and social upheaval. It is precisely this question of the relationship between artefact, nation, and elite traveller that engaged Virginia Woolf's modernist writing a century ago and is reflected in works such as her 1906 autobiographical essay, "A Dialogue on Mt Pentelicus" and *Jacob's Room* (1922). Woolf herself travelled to the Acropolis with her Cambridge-educated brothers in 1906; she experienced the Egyptomania of the 1920s; and she had close friends who travelled extensively, including Vita Sackville-West, who wrote to Woolf about the cultural artefacts she saw in destinations such as Egypt and the Levant.[12] Woolf used references to the art and culture of Ancient Greece in her work to illustrate how the curriculum of Oxbridge and the public school system contributed to a sense amongst the educated class that the ancient Greeks were the pinnacle of all civilized people, and the English were their rightful inheritors.[13] Take for example the moment in *Jacob's Room* when Jacob climbs the Acropolis—"a drum of marble conveniently placed, from which Marathon could be seen"[14]—and looks for a good place to sit down. Here Jacob consciously or unconsciously must have had Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in mind. One hundred years before Jacob, Childe Harold also climbs the Acropolis to sit "upon this massy stone, / The marble column's yet unshaken base."[15] Childe Harold's "type," the first real example of the romantic or Byronic hero—well educated, charming, moody, arrogant, seducer of women, and often outcast—was probably a character model for Jacob. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* describes the journeys and musings of a world-weary young man who, like Jacob, looks for fulfilment in his travels abroad. Throughout the poem, as Childe

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[12] See, for example, Vita Sackville-West, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell Leaska (San Francisco: Cleis, 2001), 95.

[13] See Heidi Stalla, "Woolf and Anti-Semitism: Is Jacob Jewish?", in *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 226.

[14] Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt Brace & Company, 1978), 150.

[15] George Gordon Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (London: John Murray, 1812), 66.

Harold reflects on his life, he muses on the lost glories of ancient Greece. In particular, he laments imperialist attitudes spread through war and the subsequent vandalism by men such as Lord Elgin, who took artefacts from Greece to display in their home countries:

X.

Here let me sit upon this massy stone,
The marble column's yet unshaken base;
Here, son of Saturn! was thy fav'rite throne:
Mightiest of many such! Hence let me trace
The latent grandeur of thy dwelling place.
It may not be: nor ev'n can Fancy's eye
Restore what Time hath labour'd to deface.
Yet these proud pillars claim no passing sigh,
Unmov'd the Moslem sits, the light Greek carols by.

XI.

But who, of all the plunderers of yon fane
On high—where Pallas linger'd, loth to flee
The latest relic of her ancient reign—
The last, the worst, dull spoiler, who was he?
Blush, Caledonia! such thy son could be!
England! I joy no child he was of thine:
Thy free-born men should spare what once was free;
Yet they could violate each saddening shrine,
And bear these altars o'er the long-reluctant brine.

Childe Harold cries in anger about the theft of the marbles:

Dull is the eye that will not weep to see
Thy walls defac'd, thy mouldering shrines remov'd
By British hands, which it had best behov'd
To guard those relics ne'er to be restor'd.[16]

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[16] Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 68.

But Jacob—whose intention has been merely to find a column for a good place to read—puts his thumb in his book, looks up, and asks, “Why not rule countries in the way they should be ruled?”[17] Jacob behaves like a young donkey when he comes to the Acropolis, believing, because it is what he has been taught, that the English are the rightful inheritors of the Greece of Plato and Sophocles. Instead of sharing Childe Harold’s lament of the spot “where Pallas linger’d, loth to flee / The latest relic of her ancient reign,” he marches over with his Baedeker guide to stand “on the exact spot where the great statue of Athena used to stand,”[18] as if to establish himself in her place. Hardly looking at the view, his mind leaps ahead to other sites on his Grand Tour: “after doing Greece he was going to knock off Rome. The Roman civilization was a very inferior affair, no doubt.”[19] Thus, looking off into the distance without truly seeing what is immediately at hand, he starts to imagine an essay that is really Woolf’s satire of academic remove: “The ruins of the Coliseum suggest some fairly sublime reflections, which [Jacob] would write out at length in letters. It might turn to an essay upon civilization. A comparison between the ancients and moderns, with some pretty sharp hits at Mr. Asquith—something in the style of Gibbon.” Jacob idealizes the classical world so much that he fails to understand that learning ancient Greek does not make an Englishman a Greek, nor does it give him the tools to respond in any meaningful way to the policies of men like Asquith—who ultimately will make the decision that sends Jacob to war. Moreover, by aligning himself with the historian Edward Gibbon, famous for his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Jacob sets himself up to follow in the footsteps of one of the initiators of what Woolf calls, in *A Room of One’s Own*, “the man’s sentence”,[20] from which women are excluded. Jacob lacks the imagination and humility to question exactly what his place is in the real world around him, where he is in fact the inheritor of the culture that has pillaged the Parthenon and is now mobilizing for war.

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[17] Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 150.

[18] Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 149.

[19] Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 136.

[20] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981), 76.

Jacob, who has grown up in the cool shade of the British Museum (the site of ideological and cultural imperialism where he is free to admire the Parthenon marbles in glass cases), differs from Childe Harold (and Byron) in that his indifference to the world around him lies in stark contrast to what Woolf describes as Byron's charge at "high voltage"[21] against Lord Elgin's abduction of the marbles. Instead, as both part and parcel of the system that drives imperialism, he has effectively been framed by that system from the start, just as he finds himself framed by French tourists who mark him with their cameras pointed like guns at his head.[22] Jacob is being set up to be metaphorically shot and then memorialized like an object in a museum; his unknowing posture on the ravished site of the famous Elgin marbles continues a metaphorical cycle of the decline and fall of empires. In Woolf's version, the tourists are unwitting participants in this pattern.

In writing this scene in *Jacob's Room*, Woolf would have recognized the aesthetic, idealized beauty of the displaced marbles as representative of a dangerous kind of nostalgia: a yearning for convention, the past, a national identity even, that is lost or exists only in cheap replication. This is precisely the kind of nostalgia that we want to avoid today. When Jacob climbs the Acropolis, and then inserts himself physically as stand-in for Athena-cum-Britannia, he embraces the imperial culture that Byron's Childe Harolde resists. Woolf's implicit reference to Byron's poem, which in turn evokes the cultural appropriation of the Parthenon marbles, is in keeping with the social commentary of a text that questions government policies and education systems that groom young men as pawns in the pageantry of expansion abroad—then under the rubric of imperialism, but now, perhaps, in the spirit of what we call cosmopolitanism. *Jacob's Room* depicts England coming to the end of an era of appropriating the cultural spoils of other nations—the Parthenon marbles by Lord Elgin, King Tut by Howard Carter, and the Koh-i-Noor diamond by Queen Victoria. The ordure of imperialism that permeates the atmosphere of *Jacob's Room* makes sense in a book engaging with the hypocrisy of locking the Elgin

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[21] Woolf discusses Byron's "genuine feeling about Athens" in a 1930 diary entry. See Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, *1925-1930*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 288.

[22] Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 151.

marbles up in the British Museum, and with the ideology which can transform the statue of Athena into Britannia. Woolf's narrator in the aforementioned "A Dialogue on Mt Pentelicus", ridicules the young Cambridge scholars traveling to Greece not only because they want to try out their Ancient Greek on the natives, or because they imagine themselves to be the rightful inheritors of Greece, but also because they are name-dropping—more interested in claiming the name-brand of Ilissos by imagining themselves to be in conversation with Phaedrus and Socrates walking along its banks, than actually listening to the values of freedom and truth that the ancient philosophers espoused. Their gaze is perpetually inwards and self-aggrandizing; as such they are guilty of the brutish pride that goes hand in hand with the imperial impulse—rejecting even the notion that they are tourists in a foreign land—as if self-identifying as tourists makes for a lesser state of being. Woolf's recent university graduates are incapable of looking beyond these elite symbols of Hellenic culture for ways to rebuild and restructure that are at once transnational and inclusive: distinctive, innovative, yet intimately connected to community and tradition—values that still might yet differentiate Abu Dhabi's youth from Woolf's early twentieth-century caricatures.

Both *Jacob's Room* and "A Dialogue on Mt Pentelicus" suggest that the English appropriation of ancient Greek culture is an artificial construct, even potentially serving as a kind of escape from the muddle of modernity. One questions whether Abu Dhabi, by playing host to name-brand museums and institutions is looking west the way that England in its age of expansion looked east, thereby repeating a pattern of the material and intellectual appropriation of culture as a means of shaping, ordering, strengthening—and dreaming—national confidence and power.

Lest We Forget

A day after the *New York Times* article was published in December 2014, a London reporter for *The Times* described the British Museum's decision to lend Ilissos to the Hermitage as cultural diplomacy at its most inspired:

> The lending abroad of any of the Elgin Marbles tells the world that the British Museum does not intend to hoard them. Lending Ilissos to Russia in particular sends a more pointed message, too. This faintly mottled

> sculpture, 2,500 years old, depicts a river beside which Socrates and Phaedrus would ruminate on freedom and truth, twin pillars of the democracy that Vladimir Putin would rather stifle than unleash. It conveys, according to the museum's director, Neil MacGregor, a message that Russia needs to hear.[23]

We might consider Abu Dhabi's new museum culture in this light, as an opportunity for communication, education, and exchange. Of course the proximity of the Louvre and the Guggenheim museums to NYU Abu Dhabi, which claims to be the first true modern-day liberal arts college in the Middle East, is no coincidence: art and education have a symbiotic relationship. However, while bringing an international art scene and a global university to a desert island seems to represent the best kind of cosmopolitan impulse, those at the helm might listen to Woolf's warning of a century ago about the psychological challenges inherent in transporting culture: namely the tendency to dig in, to repeat structures of hierarchy rather than learning from and taking the best from the past. Elsheshtawy tells us that critics of the museum projects claim that the movement, as "part of a larger phenomenon involving the role of the museum in a global world," is "symptomatic of 'the McDonaldization' of culture." The idea of a museum and a cultural elite "has in effect been turned into a brand that can be placed anywhere. Abu Dhabi by acquiring this brand, is thus plugging itself into this global cultural network—becoming another stop on the world art circuit."[24] Elsheshtawy suggests that in order to "counter the 'cultural colonialism' perspective and also to show that this is not just a matter of utilizing surplus capital generated from oil […] the local population needs to be given a framework within which they can view these projects." Abu Dhabi still has the chance to assimilate rather than appropriate, to study the symbolism of relics of the past, regardless of origin, for the underlying values they represent (i.e. in the case of Ilissos, freedom and truth) rather than merely acquiring art for the sake of acquiring art—or for its monetary value. In this way, cultural appropriation can be a way of building an ordered structure, of looking outward to then look inward, thus creating a transnational framework that does the work

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[23] "A Message in Marble," *The Times*, 5 December 2014.

[24] Elsheshtawy, "The Production of Culture," 139.

Emirati Family Photographs.[25]

that—as classical scholar Ian Jenkins tells us—was part of the original function of the Parthenon structures: to establish and perpetuate foundation myths, memory, values, and identity.[26]

Scott Massey in his essay, “The Arts as Knowing”, says that

> the arts are a powerful symbol system, like that of number and language; they are multi-sensory and engage multiple forms of intelligence; they employ distinctive, nonlinear forms of thinking and problem-solving; and they create some of our most powerful forms of symbolic communication.[27]

Viewing the arts and in turn heritage artefacts in this kind of engaged way—as components of a living archive, rather than as solid objects to be acquired and displayed—might go far towards building a framework for understanding multi-cultural, multi-temporal material in a transnational context. For example, while it has gained nowhere near the press afforded the still-to-be-unveiled exhibitions of the Louvre and the Guggenheim, a powerful project called *Lest We Forget:*

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[25] *Lest We Forget: Emirati Family Photographs, 1950-1999* (Abu Dhabi: Salama Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, 2015), 419, 423.

[26] Ian Dennis Jenkins, *The Parthenon Sculptures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 13.

[27] Scott T. Massey, “The Arts as Knowing,” *On Common Ground* 5 (Fall 1995): 5.

The Acropolis[28]

Structures of Memory in the U.A.E., has emerged from the work of American professor, Michelle Bambling, and her students in a Fine Art program at Zayed University. The initial exhibition in 2011 included a showcase of hard-to-access and precious Emirati family photographs from the students' families' personal albums from 1960 to 1999. Students were invited to curate the first exhibition by exploring the methods of well-known American photographer Susan Meiselas, who builds borderless exhibition spaces that aim to capture collective memory through photography and storytelling. Since 2011, *Lest We Forget* has gained considerable publicity and exposure in the community, and the second exhibition was housed, not in a state-of the art museum, but in an old fort, Qasr al Hosn, which was concurrently used as an educational space for local and international artists, filmmakers, students, and academics to talk about topics intimately tied to the project. The collection itself has grown through crowdsourcing, and relies on intergenerational engagement and sharing within the Emirati community. Tasks include transforming materials from one medium to another, interpreting artefacts through structured annotations or free-text, and also producing new creative work from objects of cultural heritage. The curatorial approach is closer in its ethos to the vernacular tradition of Emirati culture, and distinct from the more discrete display of artefacts in traditional western museums. While Vogel focused on the museums currently being built on Saadiyat Island in her article

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[28] http://www.faosgallery.com/photo/gr0162/.

NYU Abu Dhabi[29]

about "a new art capital finding its own voice," she would have done well to include the ongoing living archive of the *Lest We Forget* project as well, which provides an alternative to what Elsheshtawy warns is a "top-down" approach on the part of the government—"seemingly grounded in noble cultural and educational objectives, but in fact deeply embedded in a global capitalist discourse."[30] One problem with Jacob in Woolf's novel is that he is a perpetual wanderer—often amongst Roman and Greek ruins. He is rootless, voiceless, with a fistful of pennies in his pockets that are stamped with the image of Britannia—an imitation of Athena. Unlike the young Emirati women who are encouraged through *Lest We Forget* to interpret and creatively respond to the photographs and artefacts they produce and display, Jacob's training has him staring at objects out of context, in glass boxes, under the shade of the British Museum. This tendency towards appropriation and imitation eschews authenticity and leaves Jacob and his reader with a fractured sense of what it means to build both self and national identities.

In her essay "Composition as Explanation," published by the Woolfs' Horgarth Press in 1925, Gertrude Stein talks about art as fixed and unchanging except through the shifting consciousness of generations:

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[29] http://www.thenational.ae/uae//in-pictures-aerial-view-of-abu-dhabi-city#3.

[30] Elsheshtawy, "The Production of Culture," 142.

> The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.[31]

While fundamental aspects of culture remain fixed through time, the material expression of cultural practices, which in and of themselves speak to a particular time and place, are of course always fodder for reinterpretation and repurposing. Whereas Stein's ideas about composition do not explicitly include a transnational gaze, bringing new eyes to describe—and emend—works of art can both obscure and complicate the original in powerful and political ways.

Just as England looked to the cultural spoils of conquest to build and deepen its museums and education systems, Abu Dhabi is looking to the west in what might be considered a new version of cultural appropriation that relies on wealth to acquire key symbolic cultural institutions rather than seizing objects as spoils of war. These institutions themselves are carefully crafted spaces meant to curate and arrange aspects of material and intellectual culture from across the globe, while the country grows and formulates a sense of self. In the best possible outcome, this identity will mirror its existing demographic: in other words, it will be a composite of deeply embedded Arab cultural practices influenced by the eclectic mores, practices, and even materials of its expatriate communities. One hopes that the movement of the fractured objects of history to a new home in the Arabian Gulf, and the invitation to the world's tourists to view international and local artefacts on Arab soil, will not mean a repetition of history where the currency and exchange of art and culture from outside promotes an inward-looking gaze based on acquisition and pageantry. One hopes instead that it will constitute an inclusive and even triumphant act, based on a true and democratic engagement with the complex layering of the past.

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[31] Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 216.