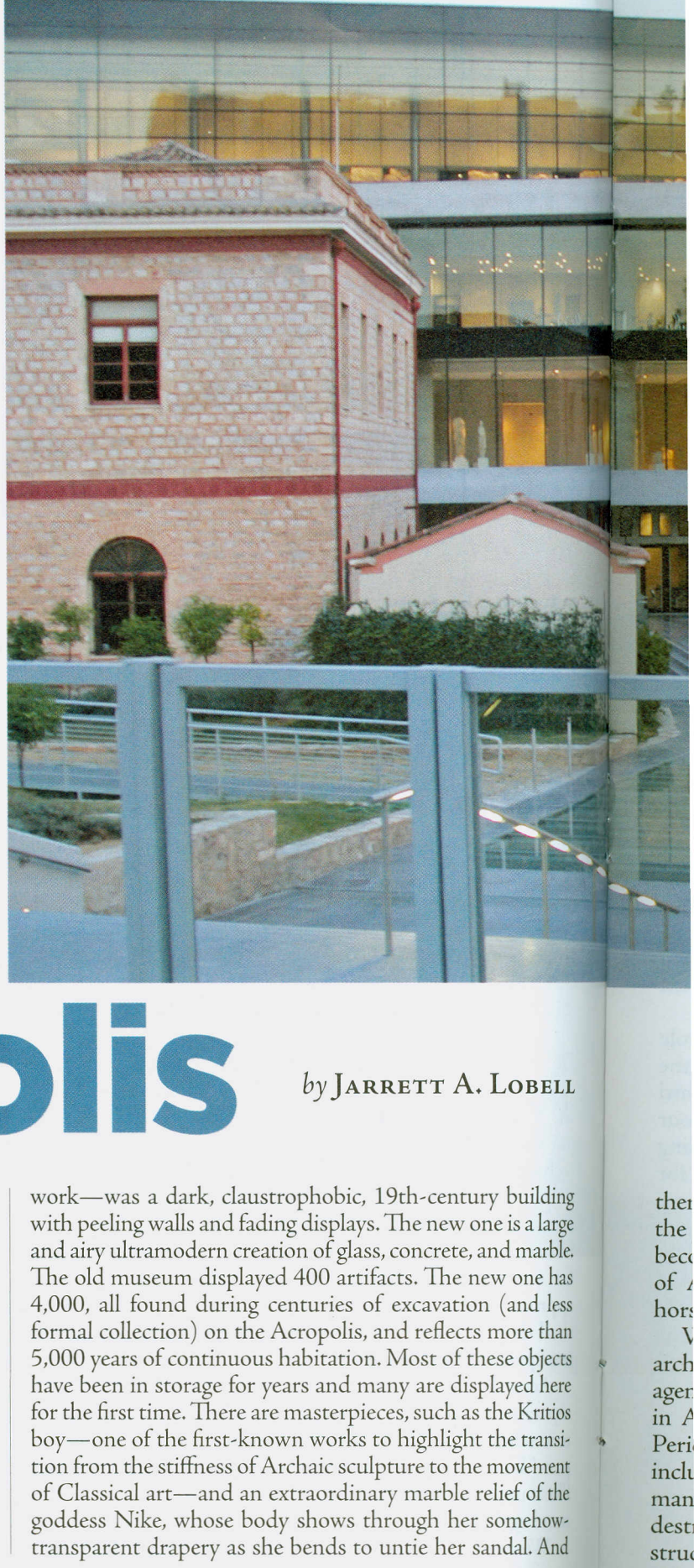


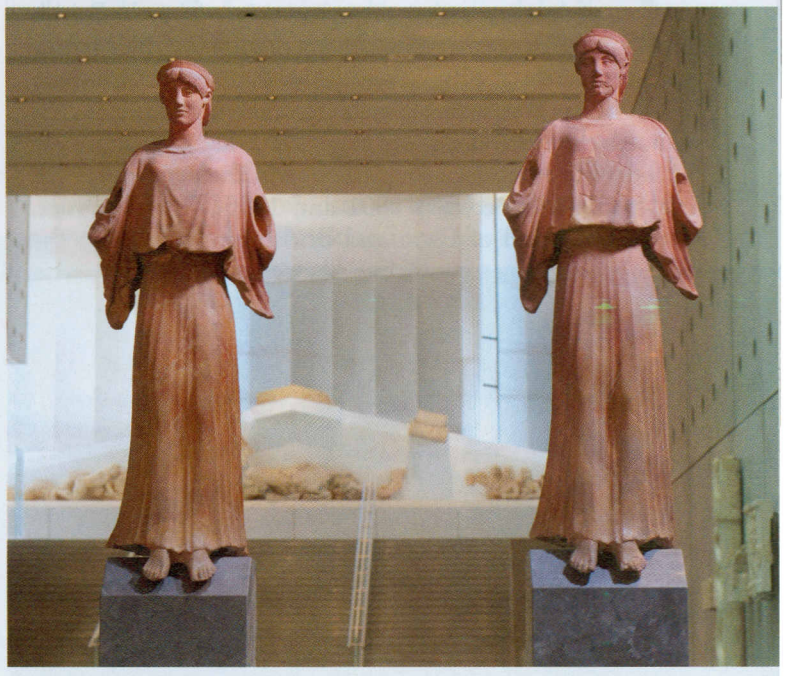
A New Home for Treasures of the Acropolis

by Jarrett A. Lobell

The busiest person at the new Acropolis Museum in Athens on the morning of its official opening was the window washer. I watched as he moved his ladder across the building's facade, holding a bottle of glass cleaner in one hand and a red towel in the other. With thousands of square feet of glass panels forming the walls, he had a lot to do before the museum welcomed heads of state, diplomats, and European royalty for a formal opening ceremony that evening. Despite the magnitude of the event—the culmination of decades of lobbying and lawsuits—everything was remarkably calm. Uninterested policemen stood around, chatting loudly. The occasional tourist stopped to take photos. Kids played a noisy game of soccer and kicked up dust. People were out walking their dogs, shopping, or just enjoying the sun before the Athenian summer heat kicked in. True, there were still a few cranes in the museum's backyard, and some exposed electrical cables still snaked across the ground. But the city was ready.

It's hard for outsiders to conceive of this museum's importance to the Greeks. The ancient world is part of their identity in a way that can be difficult to appreciate. And there is no more potent link to this past than the buildings and artifacts of the Acropolis. This enormous flat-topped rock rising 500 feet above sea level is home to iconic buildings representing Greece's fifth-century B.C. "Golden Age"—the Temple of Athena Nike (Victory) covered in friezes showing Athenian military prowess; the striking marble women who take the place of columns on the Erechtheion's porch; and the Parthenon, dedicated to Athena, the patron goddess of Athens—all symbols not only of the city, but of the highest artistic achievements of classical Greece. In the words of culture minister Antonis Samaras, addressing the first group of foreign journalists touring the museum, "Be inspired by the museum's transcendent message, which is Greek and therefore universal, but ours alone to share...and please remember that what you will discover is not just part of our history, it is also a part of our soul, of who we are."

Some 300 yards from the south slope of the Acropolis, the new museum couldn't be more different from its predecessor next to the Parthenon. The old museum—now used as storage and space for restoration work—was a dark, claustrophobic, 19th-century building with peeling walls and fading displays. The new one is a large and airy ultramodern creation of glass, concrete, and marble. The old museum displayed 400 artifacts. The new one has 4,000, all found during centuries of excavation (and less formal collection) on the Acropolis, and reflects more than 5,000 years of continuous habitation. Most of these objects have been in storage for years and many are displayed here for the first time. There are masterpieces, such as the Kritios boy—one of the first-known works to highlight the transition from the stiffness of Archaic sculpture to the movement of Classical art—and an extraordinary marble relief of the goddess Nike, whose body shows through her somehow-transparent drapery as she bends to untie her sandal. And



Above: The new Acropolis Museum integrates the history of Athens, from the 19th-century former military hospital (left) that houses the museum's offices to the excavation under the museum's courtyard, and especially the Parthenon, visible in reflection at the top. Right: Two rarely displayed terracotta second- to third-century A.D. figures of the goddess Nike greet visitors.

there are sculptures from the Parthenon honoring Athena—the pediment with her victory over the sea god Poseidon to become the city's patron, and a frieze depicting a procession of Athenian citizens, musicians, sacrificial animals, and horsemen celebrating her.

While the old museum was created simply to house archaeological remains, the new one has a more complicated agenda. Architecture and politics have long been intertwined in Athens. In the fifth century B.C., Athenian statesman Pericles directed an ambitious building program, which included the Parthenon, to glorify Athens and reconstruct many of the monuments on the Acropolis that had been destroyed by the Persians in 480 B.C. Some vestiges of these structures remained and many were incorporated into the

Ten years of excavation at the museum site uncovered evidence of more than 3,500 years of habitation, including houses, large wells and cisterns, roads, and thousands of artifacts. After protest by prominent archaeologists, the excavation was integrated in the building's design, allowing appreciation of another layer of the city's history.

new designs. Perhaps the most meaningful statement was the inclusion in the Parthenon of the foundation blocks of the ruined temple to Athena begun in the early fifth century. By preserving these remains, the Athenians created a potent monument to the Persian destruction that would remind any visitor to the Acropolis how far the city had come since those dark days.

THE MODERN GREEK GOVERNMENT insists that one of the museum's main purposes is to force the British Museum to return the Parthenon Marbles (commonly known as the Elgin Marbles) to Athens. These include nearly half of the surviving architectural sculptures from the temple's exterior—15 of the original 92 metopes, hundreds of feet of the 426-foot-long frieze, and the majority of the east pediment. Between 1801 and 1805, Thomas Bruce, the seventh Earl of Elgin and British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, which then controlled Athens, removed the sculptures from the Acropolis. At first he intended to decorate his estate in Scotland with the works, and then tried to sell them to the British Museum, before finally using them as collateral for debts owed to the British government. Almost since the sculptures were removed, the Greeks have been trying to get them back. One of the British Museum's long-standing arguments for keeping the marbles in London has been that there was no appropriate place to display them in Athens. There is now.

But it is a mistake to focus solely on the museum's role in the effort to recover the marbles. I walked through the museum the day before it opened with its architect Bernard Tschumi. As a few other journalists and I waited for our tour to begin, I thought about the idea of building anything next to the Acropolis. It's a bit like creating a museum for Michelangelo right next to St. Peter's Basilica. But Tschumi embraced the challenge, and let the environment, the collection, and mostly the Acropolis determine every aspect of his design. For example, the glass walls take advantage of the plentiful sunshine. No artificial illumination is needed and the sculptures, many of which stood outside on the Acropolis, can be seen in natural light.

Controversy over the preservation of early-20th-century Art Deco apartments next to the museum was a major obstacle to its completion. Only two buildings, including 17 Dionysiou Areopagitou (left), remain after dozens of lawsuits to decide their fate.

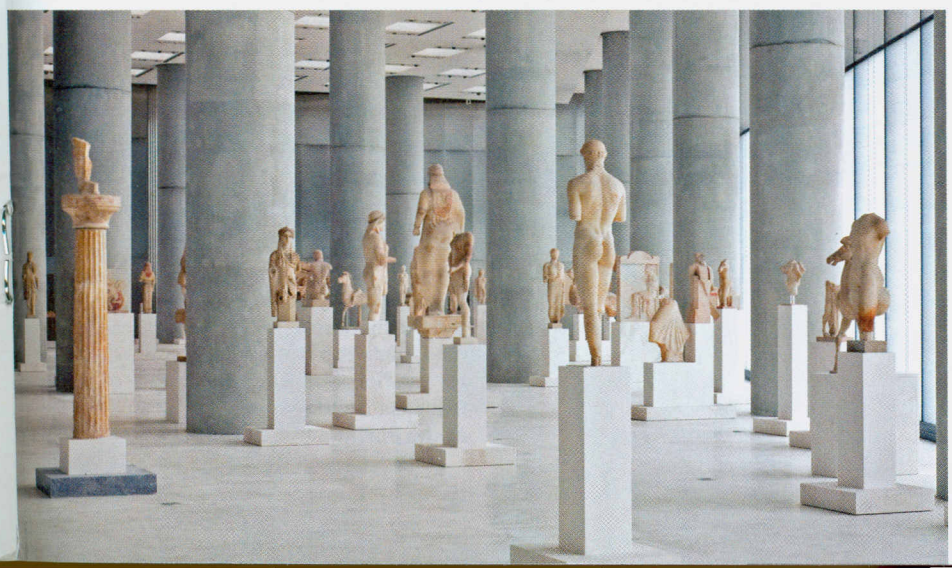
Five of the original six caryatids from the Erechtheion on the Acropolis are installed on a porch intended to recall the building. The sixth is in the British Museum, and her space has been left deliberately empty.

When I looked through the panels toward the Acropolis at the center of this teeming modern city, I could see how it still dominates the story of Athens. The past and the present are engaged here in much the same way they were in antiquity. Kallikrates, the architect of the new temple to Athena Nike, completed around 420 B.C., enshrined the remains of an earlier temple and of the goddess's cult statue in a specially designed basement level. He also included a window into the foundations through which worshipers could view the remains and remember the sanctity of the old temple's site and the outrage of the Persians' destruction of it. Similarly, the highly unusual architecture of the Erechtheion, completed in 406 B.C., was designed to avoid destroying some of the city's most sacred sites, including the spot where Poseidon hit the Acropolis with his trident in the competition with Athena for patronage of the city; the tomb of Kekrops, the mythical half-man, half-serpent king who judged the competition; and the sacred olive tree that sprouted when the goddess struck the earth with her spear, ensuring her victory and eternal patronage of the city that henceforth bore her name.

Most people will probably begin their visit by going straight in the museum's entrance, but I stopped on Dionysiou Areopagitou, the pedestrian street in front, to consider the early-20th-century apartment buildings that have presented primary challenges to Tschumi and museum president and archaeologist Dimitrios Pandermalis. After more than 100 lawsuits, most of the original buildings have been torn down and the owners compensated. But two buildings—numbers 17 and 19—remain disputed. The government has recently rescinded the buildings' landmark status, perhaps hastening their demise. On number 19, multilingual signs put up by its residents read, "If this building looks neglected it is because the Ministry of Culture has issued a decree preventing any repair or maintenance works...it has been almost two years since we submitted our proposal [to surround the building with large trees and thus cover its less appealing back] but there has been no response so far." The issue of these two holdouts is far from resolved—the museum wants the buildings, which block part of the view of the Acropolis from the museum's café, torn down. But the buildings' residents want to keep their homes. Looking at the elegant facades, carved entranceways, and delicate iron balconies of these excellent examples of Art Deco architecture, I wondered if it's right for a museum that encourages its visitors to consider the Acropolis and its surroundings as part of the city to demolish another part of its history.

As I headed for the museum's entrance, I noticed I wasn't walking on the courtyard's gray marble pavement, but on a wide glass pathway. Peering down through a maze of painted black polka dots, meant to help those who suffer from vertigo, I soon realized that there was a past excavation beneath me—a strange experience for someone trained for many years not to walk on top of archaeology.

During a decade of work on the site before most of the museum was even built, excavators uncovered evidence of habitation here dating from the end of the Neolithic period (about 3000 B.C.) to at least the seventh century A.D. Looking down into one immaculately excavated section not covered by glass, I saw dozens of wells and cisterns—reminders of the abundant underground water supply that first attracted people to settle here—and well-preserved house walls and roads. There is also a Classical



The second-floor Archaic Gallery showcases works dating from the seventh to fifth centuries B.C. The gallery has only natural light and it's possible to walk around each sculpture, allowing the visitor to experience the works as if they were in their original settings.

In October 2007, cranes began to remove works of art from storage in the then-closed museum on top of the Acropolis to ready them for installation in the new museum.

androm (a large open space for entertaining), which Pandermalis thinks may have been for *symposia*, ancient Greek debating-drinking parties. I could imagine tipsy philosophers discussing the day's most pressing issues here as the future soccer stars shrieked behind me.

We stopped and Tschumi noted how, after pressure from many prominent archaeologists, including a lawsuit brought by the International Council on Museums and Sites (ICOMOS), he had to modify the design of the building so as to neither cover up nor destroy this section of ancient Athens ("Acropolis Museum Is Back on Track," July/August 2004). To preserve the remains, Tschumi raised the whole museum up on massive concrete columns and suspended it over the excavations, no small feat in an earthquake-prone part of the world. Pointing to one of these columns, he laughed and said, "I call this the fourth architectural order. There's Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Tripartite," the last referring to the fact that each column is composed of three thinner ones to leave as small a footprint as possible on the remains below. Once conservation work is finished, visitors will be able to begin their tour at the excavation level and consider how the evidence of Athens's past is always part of its present and how here—as on the Acropolis itself—it is venerated.

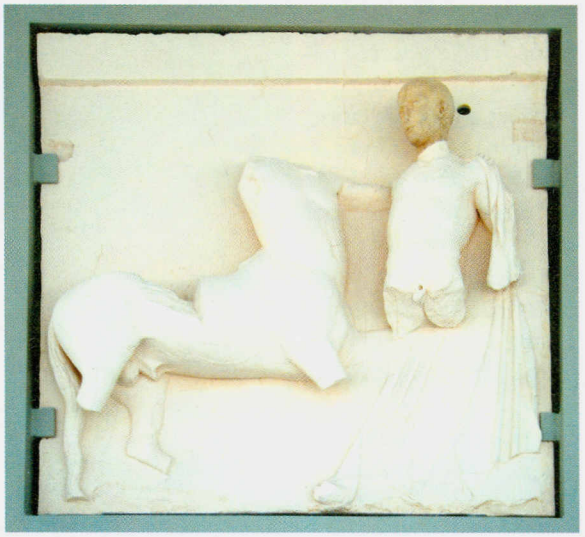
Once inside the museum, I stood on a gently sloping glass ramp, from which it is possible to see all the way to the building's top floor, listening to Tschumi explain many of the carefully considered details of his design, such as how the ramp recalls the one leading up to the Acropolis, how circular holes all over the walls absorb noisy echoes, and how much he hates to design museum furniture (the only places to sit are simple marble cubes that do not clutter the space, but may make it a bit difficult to stop and contemplate the artwork). On each side of the ramp are cabinets filled with vases, marble reliefs, ceramic incense burners, bronze tripods, and other artifacts found on the Acropolis. At the top of the ramp, I encountered a large, brightly painted limestone sea monster, lions attacking a bull, and Herakles and the sea-god Triton, remains from the pediments of the Hekatompedon, Athena's first temple on the Acropolis, which dates to about 580 B.C.

Rounding a corner to the second-floor Archaic Gallery, I was surrounded by sculptures from the period between the seventh century B.C. and the Persian Wars of the fifth century B.C. I walked around each work, none of which is behind glass. I felt like I was standing on a massive chessboard, each sculpture like a piece captured in place during a match. It's also the way visitors must have felt thousands of years ago—in antiquity, the Acropolis was covered with sculptures, and not just the building remains we see today.

As I climbed the stairs to the top level and the Parthenon Gallery, I took a deep breath, not because I was winded, but because I was worried. Here is where the art and politics collide, and I was concerned that this confrontation would overshadow the sculptures. It does. The room's enormous size,

Through the glass walls of **the Parthenon Gallery on the museum's top floor, visitors can for the first time see sculptures from the building while looking at the Parthenon itself.**

natural light, and parallel alignment with the Parthenon make it an ideal space to display the temple's architectural sculptures exactly as they were installed on its exterior. For the first time in more than 200 years, it's possible to follow the continuous narrative of the frieze and be able to see the temple itself at the same time. I smiled a bit incredulously when Tschumi noted that once he started measuring the space required to place the temple's sculptures in their original positions, the dimensions turned out to be exactly those of the Parthenon. Of course they were—they were made for the temple.



Original marble pieces of the Parthenon's frieze (like the head above) are inserted into plaster casts of the panels, most of which are in the British Museum, reinforcing the message that the Greeks want the marbles back.

But there the harmony ends. Next to and sometimes joined with the original sculptures—mellowed with age but still with the liveliness of marble—are lifeless white plaster casts of the missing pieces, most of which are in the British Museum. I found the contrast striking and disturbing, but that's precisely the point. This gallery is only partly about displaying sculptures. It's also about showcasing Greek demands for the return of the Parthenon Marbles. A metope with a scene of a centaur attacking a Lapith (a mythological people), is all plaster except for the Lapith's marble head, which is stuck into the panel. The taut muscles of Poseidon's marble torso from the west pediment stand in sharp contrast to the dull white of his plaster shoulders and back.

Even if you didn't know the marbles' whole story, the displays are unsettling. So is the decision to exhibit original blocks of the decorative frieze at full depth, while the casts are only half as deep, to illustrate how Elgin had them brutally sawed off the building. Soon the words of Minister Samaras, who described the marbles as having been "abducted" and "being held hostage in enforced exile," came back to me. Wouldn't I be distressed on an emotional level if the Liberty Bell were broken into pieces along its crack and exhibited somewhere other than Philadelphia? Or if the Statue of Liberty still stood in New York Harbor, but with her head removed to Berlin and her torch to Moscow? To honor the museum's opening, several sculptural fragments that had been removed—including a foot of the goddess Artemis from a museum in Palermo and part of the foot of a lyre-player at Heidelberg University, as well as several pieces from the Vatican—were returned to Athens. It remains to be seen which, if any, other pieces will follow. For now, the British Museum remains emphatic that the marbles will stay in London.

At the museum's opening ceremony, culture minister Antonis Samaras fit a marble head of the goddess Iris into the Parthenon's frieze. The head has always been in Athens, while the rest of the panel is in London.

After spending more time wandering through the museum on my own, I wanted to find Pandermalis and give him several photographs I had taken five years ago when I was in Athens and the museum was still under construction. Then the excavation area was filled with sand to protect it during construction, only the stumps of the columns that would eventually support the building were visible, and the olive trees had yet to be planted in the museum's garden. At that time we had talked about how his dream of completing the new museum in time for the 2004 Olympics had been dashed by a series of delays, including the ICOMOS lawsuit. Pandermalis had told me it was important to continue with plans to build the museum and figure out how to excavate and preserve the archaeology, and not to halt construction completely and "not touch anything." We also spent a lot of time discussing the marbles. We talked about their artistic significance, their historical importance, and of how confident he was that the museum's "permanent protest" for their return would be successful. I finally found Pandermalis in the courtyard giving an interview about the museum to Greek TV. "I have a gift for you," I said, thrusting the photos into his hand. "Do you remember when we took these?" Pandermalis took them from me. "Yes, I remember," he answered with smile that seemed to say, "But now we are ready." ■

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