



The six caryatids of the Erechtheion are female figures that act as supporting columns on the temple's south porch and are among one of the most iconic statues from the classical era of Athens. Five of the original figures now stand together in the New Acropolis Museum in Athens. The sixth was taken from the Acropolis between 1801-03 and now remains in the British Museum.¹ That separation of these is symbolic of the broader tensions around cultural heritage.

²This leads to questions of conservation, the legal title, provenance, the statues national identity and global access to them come together in this one single statue

Two competing narratives make up for most public debates. On one side of the argument, the Greek authorities and many other heritage advocates emphasise the integrity and cultural continuity of the six figures, these were carved to function together in a sacred architectural context, and that original function has now been disrupted by the removal by the British.³ The Greek government argues that reuniting the missing figure restores the historical and aesthetic context of the statues and corrects a nineteenth-century imbalance created by unequal power relationships. Reuniting the set also helps interpretations of the statues. Visitors will be able to see how the statues once carried an architectural load and have strong symbolic force for modern Greek cultural identity.

The other narrative of the debate stresses conservation, legal title and universal access. Institutions that hold many antiquities such as the British Museum being the most prominent example often argue that when they got the statue this occurred under the laws or practices of the time, that museums have a duty to preserve and display objects to global audiences, and that their collections create opportunities for comparative study across cultures that would be impossible if objects were permanently repatriated. In addition to this, some defenders of retention point to the care and scientific conservation work museums have invested in, arguing that these efforts have preserved objects that might otherwise have suffered further damage.⁴

Both sides have practical points. The Acropolis Museum's campaign to present the original five as visibly connected to the Acropolis and to reserve a visible empty space where the sixth

¹ The British Museum. (2022). *caryatid* | *British Museum*. [online] Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1816-0610-128 [accessed:12/10/25].

² Image, GreekTravellers, *Caryatids: The Daughters Of Athens*, (2020) <<https://greektravellers.com/blog/caryatids>> accessed: 12/10/2025.

³ Acropolis Museum (2018). *Erechtheion. Caryatid. Kore B* | *Acropolis Museum* | *Official Website*. [online] www.theacropolismuseum.gr. Available at: <https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/erechtheion-karyatid-kore-b>, [accessed: 10/10/25].

⁴ The British Museum. (2022). *caryatid* | *British Museum*. [online] Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1816-0610-128 [accessed:12/10/25].

should sit is a curatorial and rhetorical strategy, where it makes the absence as a political and historical fact and foregrounds claims for reunification. Critics of the museum's display choices, however, suggest that the presentation of the Caryatids inside the museum does not fully recover their original architectural meaning and that other display models for example, positioning the figures so visitors can appreciate their massive role to the Acropolis might better combine conservation with narrative clarity. The curatorial debate illustrates the complexity of "context", and that physical reunification is not the only way to restore meaning, but display choices can either amplify or dull the argument for return.⁵

Conservation science complicates moral clarity. Advances in cleaning and laser-assisted removal of dirt have transformed what visitors will now see, the Caryatids had careful conservation that removed centuries of grime and revealed the original tool marks and polychromy traces on the statues.⁶ This makes the statues more legible but also raises questions about intervention thresholds, how much restoration makes it as authentic as possible? Who decides when cleaning, or when stabilising treatments should be performed? The record shows museums and conservation teams on both sides of the debate have invested in science and care. forwarded by institutions that resist repatriation claims, due to how much time and money have been put into upkeep.⁷

Law and ethics are entwined but not equivalent. Legal arguments about the British Museum's title to objects taken around two centuries ago rely on the documents of when they acquired the statue. Ethical claims about the rightful ownership add to later standards which include post world war II human rights and patrimony norms and the moral weight of historical imbalance. International law does offer some areas for return and negotiated loans have become the most common route for resolving such high-profile cases but there is no one binding rule across the world that states repatriation in every case. This then adds to cases like the Caryatid are decided at the middle sections of law, politics, public opinion and willingness to negotiate.⁸

Public opinions matter and repatriation campaigns are often fuelled by visible gestures such as empty pedestals, museum exhibitions that show colonial acquisition, or public campaigns that ask citizens of the country to weigh in on the debate. Polling in recent years suggests growing public support in some countries for returning items back to its original country. This tends to

⁵ Beresford, J.M. (2016). The Caryatids in the New Acropolis Museum: Out of Sight, Out of Light, Out of Mind. *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, [online] 14(1). Available at: <<https://jcms-journal.com/articles/jcms.130>> [Accessed 12 Oct. 2025].

⁶ Williams, A.R. (2014). *2,500-Year-Old Greek Statues Sparkle After Facelift*. [online] Culture. Available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/140618-ancient-greek-statues-acropolis-laser-science-archaeology>? [Accessed 12 Oct. 2025].

⁷ Williams, A.R. (2014). *2,500-Year-Old Greek Statues Sparkle After Facelift*. [online] Culture. Available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/140618-ancient-greek-statues-acropolis-laser-science-archaeology>? [Accessed 12 Oct. 2025].

⁸ Greece-athens.com. (2025). *Legal and ethical issues*. [online] Available at: <https://www.greece-athens.com/parthenon/marbles/legal.htm> [accessed:9/10/25].

change political opinions and can motivate museum boards and governments to re-examine their artifacts. At the same time, museum audiences in multiple countries still value access to these masterpieces, and if this doesn't change then other countries will not return artifacts to their true home.⁹

So how should we weigh the arguments? A defensible middle path recognises several propositions. First, conservation and scholarly access, they matter and should be allowed. Second, provenance and historical justice also matter, when objects were removed in ways that today seem morally suspicious, the ethical claims of this allow the counties to put this to the forefront . Third, authenticity and meaning depend on context, and where practicable reunification or long-term loans that allow objects to be experienced in their originating contexts will allow others to see them in their true form. Finally, transparency and institutional cooperation are making solutions such as open provenance research, joint exhibitions, shared conservation projects and reciprocal loans can build trust and generate outcomes that can be seen as better than one country doing all the work.

Applied to the Caryatid case specifically, these principles point to options that are either negotiated long-term loans or a permanent return combined with cooperative research and traveling displays could satisfy both the Greek case for cultural integrity and international interests in access and academic exchange. The Acropolis Museum's choice to display the five originals alongside an empty space is a persuasive move and could be one that restores the missing sister while ensuring that global audiences can continue to engage with the material through collaborations and rotating exhibitions.

⁹ Museums Association. (2020). *Are museums responding well to the growing public discourse on repatriation?* - Museums Association. [online] Available at: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2019/02/12022019-are-museums-responding-well-to-growing-public-discourse-on-repatriation/#> [Accessed 12 Oct. 2025].

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