

PETITION OF THE EARL OF ELGIN RESPECTING HIS COLLECTION OF MARBLES.

HC Deb 15 June 1815 vol 31 cc828-30 [828](#)
[§ Mr. Robert Ward](#)

presented a Petition from the Earl of Elgin, setting forth, "That at the period of the appointment of the petitioner to the embassy to Turkey, in the year 1799, several eminent artists and patrons of the Fine Arts, lamenting that, from the prejudices of the Turks, any remains which might still exist of ancient sculpture and architecture in Greece, were inaccessible and exposed continually to destruction, directed his attention, in an especial manner, to the benefit of rescuing from danger, and securing accurate information of those remains; and that having, on these suggestions, provided the best assistants Rome could afford, and being thereby, and by the employment of all other necessary means, enabled to avail himself of every favourable opportunity, as it arose, during and since his embassy, the petitioner now begs leave to transfer to the public what he humbly conceives to be a full attainment of an object of high importance to the progress of the Fine Arts; namely, a complete series of the sculptures which formed the principal ornament of the ancient temples in Athens, specimens of their most characteristic architecture, as well as drawings, casts, vases, medals, and inscriptions from Athens, and other parts of Greece; and that, as the circumstances attending his endeavours in the attainment of this object bear no resemblance to those under which any other collection was ever presented to the public, and as it is presumed that the series of sculpture in itself has no parallel in objects ever before purchased, the petitioner hopes he may be pardoned for soliciting that the House would institute an inquiry, upon such evidence as may be procured, into the merits and value of what he now offers, and take into its consideration how far, and upon what conditions, it may be advisable that the property of the said collection should be transferred to the public."

The Chancellor of the Exchequer

considered that the possession of these marbles would be a great acquisition to the public. [829](#) If the Petition was received, he thought that it should be referred to a committee, to consider and report as to the sum that would be proper to give for the possession of them.

[§ Mr. Horner](#)

thought it important that the public should have the possession of these marbles; but he should wish that the matter might lie over till the next session, as there was not time in the present to come to as full a report as would be satisfactory. The Committee would have to inquire, not only into the actual value of these marbles, but as to the manner in which lord Elgin got possessed of them. It was surmised that it was in his public capacity he obtained them; and if that was the case, it was to be considered what degree of claim the public already had. The compensation to be given to lord Elgin was certainly very different, if he got them

in his public character, from what ought to be given if he had acquired them in another manner.

§ Mr. Bankes

agreed with his hon. and learned friend, and observed, that these marbles, from what he understood of the case, were more than half public property. He also understood that there had been a treaty with lord Elgin, and that very liberal offers on the part of the Treasury had been refused. It would be, however, much to be regretted that these marbles should be removed from the country, or from the capital.

§ Sir John Newport

thought, that a full inquiry ought to be made into the manner in which the collection had been acquired. He was afraid that the noble lord had availed himself of most unwarrantable measures, and had committed the most flagrant acts of spoliation. It seemed to have been reserved for an ambassador of this country to take away what Turks and other barbarians had always held sacred. It was the duty of the House to ascertain the truth of these matters; for otherwise, in case they should consent to purchase the collection, they would evidently sanction acts of public robbery.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer

said, he had conceived, that it would be more satisfactory for the price to be settled by the House, than in a private bargain between the Treasury and the noble lord. It was certainly so late in the session, as not to afford the opportunity of any long inquiry: but a committee of such members as were best qualified to judge of the value of those useful works of art might 830 make a report, and adjourn to next session. There were circumstances, indeed, that made it extremely inconvenient to defer the entire consideration of the subject; but if the collection could be deposited in some of the public buildings, the noble lord might not, perhaps, object to the postponement. He was inclined to believe, that the noble lord would consent to such mode of payment as might be satisfactory to the House; he had made the collection on the laudable principle of securing models for the artists of this country, and did not desire an exorbitant remuneration.

Mr. Rose

said, there had been some difficulty as to the receiving these marbles into the British Museum on account of the want of room; but the trustees were now determined to receive them, if the noble lord could agree with the public as to the price.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer

observed, that the noble lord threw himself entirely on the justice of Parliament.

§ Lord G. Cavendish

said, he believed he could state that there would be no necessity to remove the marbles from their present situation till the next session of Parliament.

[§](#) The Petition was ordered to lie on the table.

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