

# British Museum and the State Hermitage Museum celebrate 250th Enlightenment anniversary with the loan of a Parthenon sculpture

Friday 5 December 2014

The Trustees of the British Museum are delighted to announce their decision to lend the marble sculpture of the river god Ilissos, a reclining male figure from the West pediment of the Parthenon, to the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. This follows a request from the Hermitage to mark the 250th anniversary of its foundation. The sculpture will go on public display there tomorrow, Saturday 6 December 2014, until 18 January 2015 when the figure will then be displayed in the British Museum's major spring exhibition which will explore the body in ancient Greek art.

The Hermitage in St Petersburg is one of the world's great museums, founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great to enable Russia to participate in the European Enlightenment. 2014 marks its 250th anniversary. This notable year in the Hermitage's history is a cause for celebration and provides the context to this significant loan.

The British Museum is the most generous lending museum in the world, and this loan is part of ongoing exchanges between museums in Britain and Russia. Last year the Hermitage lent 40 pictures from Sir Robert Walpole's art collection to Houghton Hall in Norfolk; the British Museum's exhibitions on Ice Age art and the Vikings included 53 loans from 5 Russian lenders; and above all Tate Modern's *Malevich* exhibition included loans from 13 Russian institutions, the Hermitage alone lending 58 works. As part of the anniversary

celebrations the Hermitage will be staging an exhibition on Francis Bacon which will include works lent by Tate, the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts and Aberdeen Art Gallery.

This is the first time one of the British Museum's Parthenon sculptures, which represents about a third of the original decoration of the temple, has been requested for loan. The sculptures were presented to the Trustees by Parliament in 1816 and were a major event in the Museum's early development as a museum of world civilisations. Since then they have been freely available to many millions of visitors and have never left the Museum other than for wartime evacuation for safe keeping.

This figure of a river god has great visual presence and considerable narrative power. A supreme example of an original Greek work, it will join the largely Roman sculptures in the permanent collections in St Petersburg and add a new element to the story they tell. Casts of the Parthenon sculptures have long been familiar to the Russian public, but this loan will for the first time allow visitors in Russia the opportunity to see something entirely new and uniquely significant. This display will echo the original impact of the Parthenon sculptures when they were first displayed in London at the beginning of the 19th century. The effect of that encounter with an original ancient Greek sculpture in a world used to Greek art mediated through Roman copies can

hardly be overstated. Since their arrival in London, over 200 years ago, not only have they been seen as beautiful relics of the great age of 5th BC Athens, but also as a symbol of the importance of Athens as the world's first democracy and of the debt that modern Western cultures owe to the ancient Greeks.

The Ilissos was a river outside Athens that provided, in the Athenian summer, cool walks for the citizens. Plato writes that Socrates walked along the Ilissos with his young companion Phaedrus, debating the moral purpose of humanity and the nature of Truth. Here Socrates developed the modern idea of moral philosophy with its focus on the idea of what is real and true. The Ilissos statue speaks eloquently of the profound humanism of Athens' artistic legacy.

Here sculpted marble takes on human, living form, while the fluid pose and streaming, water-like drapery evokes the river god, raising himself onto the river's bank. The figure is one of the finest of those to survive from the Parthenon.

The loan will recognise and celebrate the parallel histories and common aims of two great museums. Both were founded on Enlightenment principles

and both are united in working to take such principles forward through the 21st century.

**Sir Richard Lambert**, Chairman of the Trustees of the British Museum, said, 'The Trustees of the British Museum hold its collection in trust and believe that the great things of the world should be shared and enjoyed by the people of the world. The duty of the Trustees is to allow citizens in as many countries as possible to share in their common inheritance. The Trustees are delighted that this beautiful object will be enjoyed by the people of Russia.'

**Neil MacGregor**, Director of the British Museum, said, 'This sculpture speaks of the world of Socrates and Plato. A great work of art, it embodies the belief in the supreme value of rational debate among free citizens. There can be no better celebration of the Enlightenment ideals which the British Museum and the Hermitage have shared for 250 years.'

**Dr Mikhaile Piotrovsky**, Director of the State Hermitage Museum, said, 'I am delighted that this important, beautiful and significant sculpture has been lent in celebration of our two museums' shared values and will be seen alongside the permanent classical sculptures of the Hermitage.'

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#### Notes to Editors:

##### Ilissos

6 December 2014 – 18 January 2015  
The Roman Yard, the New Hermitage,  
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

##### 'Survey reveals British Museum is world's largest art lender' *The Art Newspaper*, June 2013

The British Museum has a longstanding policy of lending its unparalleled collection as widely as possible across the world to benefit the greatest number of world publics. This cultural exchange is a vital part of the Museum's commitment to being a museum for the world. The Trustees reaffirm their view that exchanges of this sort are an essential part of the Museum's international role, allowing valuable dialogues to develop independently of political considerations.

The British Museum is the most generous lending collection in the world. Over 5,000 objects travelled to 335 venues in the UK and internationally in 2013–2014.

The Trustees will consider any request for any part of the collection to be borrowed subject to the usual considerations of condition and fitness to travel. The simple precondition required by the Trustees before they will consider whether or not to lend an object in the collection is that the borrowing institution can guarantee its safe return.

The British Museum has a long history of friendly collaboration with colleagues in Greece. The British Museum is currently lending objects to two exhibitions at the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens. 15 objects are on display in the exhibition *Hygieia: Health, Illness and Treatment in the Ancient Greek World*, 18 November

2014 to 31 May 2015; and 9 objects will be included in *Beyond: Homeric, Orphic and Platonic Hades*, 11 December 2014 to 8 February 2015.

The British Museum houses about 30% of the original set of Parthenon sculptures, the same percentage as those in the Acropolis Museum. A small number of fragments are also found in other European collections including the Louvre and Vatican. Almost 40% of the Parthenon sculptures no longer exist due to the reuse of and damage to the Parthenon over the 2,500 years of the building's history.

The British Museum is free to visit and works to make its collection and expertise as widely accessible as possible to a global audience.

The British Museum is the leading visitor attraction in the UK with a record-breaking 6.8 million visitors last year and a virtual audience of 35.3 million. The British Museum is the second most visited museum in the world.

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**For further information**

Please contact the British Museum Press Office on +44 20 7323 8583/8394 or [communications@britishmuseum.org](mailto:communications@britishmuseum.org)

The State Hermitage Museum  
[press@hermitage.ru](mailto:press@hermitage.ru) +7 812 710 9510

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