

Large print display text



**Greek Revival**  
**simplicity and**  
**splendour**

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in large print.**

## **Introduction**

From the 1750s onwards there was renewed interest in ancient Greek architecture across Europe. For the first time ancient Greek buildings, especially in Italy, Greece and Turkey, were studied and recorded in detail. This new research influenced contemporary architects, artists and designers.

In 1803 Robert Smirke (1780-1867), a young British architect, visited Athens, part of the Ottoman empire since 1458, to study Greek monuments as part of his professional training. In 1821 he was commissioned to design a new building for the British Museum. He chose to use the highly fashionable Greek Revival style.

**Quote:**

‘How can I by description give you any idea of the great pleasure I enjoyed in the sight of these ancient buildings of Athens!’

Robert Smirke (1780–1867)

**The west side of the Parthenon, 1803**

Robert Smirke, (1780–1867)

Smirke drew the Parthenon when it was still enveloped by medieval and later structures. His watercolour shows its white marble glowing, like a vision from the past. He was enraptured by the simple grandeur of the architecture. During his visit, Lord Elgin’s agents were removing sculpture and architectural elements from the Acropolis, later acquired by the British Museum (displayed in Room 18).

Graphite with watercolour

2011,5012.154

**Quote:**

‘Our passion for the beautiful does not make us extravagant, nor does our love of culture make us weak.’

Attributed to Perikles (about 495–429 BC), an Athenian statesman who commissioned the Parthenon

## What is the Parthenon?

The Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis is one of the most famous monuments of the ancient world. Built between 447 and 432 BC as a temple and treasury for the goddess Athena, glorifying the might of the Athenian empire, it later served as a church, a cathedral and an Ottoman mosque. After the creation of the modern Greek state in 1832, the Acropolis was cleared of later buildings to highlight the ancient structures. It is now an unmistakable icon of modern Greece.

**Image caption:**

**The Parthenon on the Acropolis.**

© lucky-photographer / Alamy Stock Photo

**Image caption:**

**Photograph of the dancer Elizaveta Nikolska on the platform of the Parthenon by Elli Sougioultzoglou-Seraidari, 1930.**

© Benaki Museum / Bridgeman Images

## Rediscovering ancient Greek architecture

Ancient Greek buildings were not studied directly or recorded comprehensively until the 1750s. Artists such as James Stuart, Nicholas Revett and William Pars began to make increasingly accurate drawings of buildings in Italy, Greece and Turkey. Published in lavishly illustrated volumes, several sponsored by a wealthy group of gentlemen and scholars called the Society of Dilettanti, these inspired many European architects, including Robert Smirke, to design in the Greek Revival style. This style spread throughout Europe and North America and became a global phenomenon.

**Image caption:**

**Drawing of the capital of the Temple of Athena at Priene, from *Ionian Antiquities* (1769).**

© Trustees of the British Museum

**The east front of the Parthenon, 1765**

William Pars, (1742–1782)

The artist William Pars visited Athens in 1765 while serving as draughtsman on the Society of Dilettanti's expedition to Turkey and Greece. This unfinished view of the Parthenon shows the mosque built within the temple and the surrounding houses and gardens of the Ottoman garrison stationed on the Acropolis. Pars is shown sitting on the upper part of the temple, which allowed him to draw some of the first detailed images of the Parthenon's sculpture.

Pen, grey ink and watercolour, with body colour, over graphite

Mm,11.5

## Robert Smirke and Greek Revival architecture

Following his return from Greece, Smirke designed many buildings in the Greek Revival style, including some directly inspired by structures in Athens. The Covent Garden Theatre, London (1809), combined a Doric portico and classical reliefs by John Flaxman with highly advanced construction methods. The County Buildings in Perth, Scotland (1819) boasts an eight-columned portico inspired by the Parthenon. Smirke also designed buildings in various medieval styles such as castles and churches.

**Image caption:**  
**Covent Garden Theatre (1809).**  
© British Library

**Image caption:**  
**Perth County Buildings and Assembly Rooms (1819).** © David Gray, All rights reserved

## Designing the British Museum

When designing the new British Museum building, Smirke integrated architectural forms and details from numerous ancient buildings of different styles to create a highly modern structure. He used all of the three main Greek orders of architecture – the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian.

The Parthenon and other Doric-style buildings inspired the British Museum's entrance hall and what is now the Egyptian sculpture gallery (Room 4), while the colonnade and decorative mouldings derive from Ionic-style temples in Athens and in Priene and Teos in Turkey. Smirke used the Corinthian order in the King's Library (Room 1).

## Design for the south front of the British Museum, about 1847

Sydney Smirke, (1797–1877)

Robert Smirke's design for the south front of the British Museum was much plainer than the completed building, which was only later embellished with sculpture in the pediment. This drawing was made by Sydney Smirke, Robert's younger brother and assistant, who succeeded him as architect of the British Museum in 1846. Sydney Smirke added the famous Round Reading Room which opened in 1857 in what is now the Great Court.

Pen and ink and wash over graphite  
with some watercolour

British Museum Archives, Building Plan 280

## Ancient world to modern Greece

After centuries of Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman rule, an independent Greek state was created in 1832 following a long war of independence. Many of its leaders looked to the ancient Greek world to bring together the new country which was made up of numerous ethnic and religious groups. The ruling Wittelsbach dynasty from Germany and local organisations commissioned buildings in the Greek Revival style.

The Athenian Acropolis played a central role in this process. German architect Leo von Klenze's painting of 1846 draws on generations of archaeological research, including an understanding that ancient Greek buildings were vividly painted. Many new buildings inspired by the past were constructed in the new capital Athens in the 1800s.

### Quote:

'Let there be light!' said Liberty And, like sunrise  
from the sea, Athens arose!  
Hellas, Percy Shelley, 1821

### Image caption:

**Reconstruction of the Athenian Acropolis  
painted by Leo von Klenze (1846).**

© AKG Images

### Image caption:

**The Academy of Athens (1859–1885) designed  
by Danish architect Theophil Hansen.**

© Natallia Pershaj, Dreamstime

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## Find out more

### Related galleries

To see sculptures from the Parthenon visit Room 18.

To see the space designed by Robert Smirke to house the King's Library, one of the finest surviving Greek Revival interiors in the UK, visit Room 1.

To explore more of the Museum's Greek Revival architecture, scan the QR code and follow the trail.



Scan the QR code for a large print guide.



Find out more

## Events

Explore the themes of the exhibition through related events. For the full programme, visit [britishmuseum.org](http://britishmuseum.org)

### Acknowledgements

The original idea for this display was developed by Dr Ian Jenkins OBE, FSA (1953–2020), curator of Ancient Greek sculpture at the British Museum from 1978 to 2020, and it is presented in his memory.

### Join in online



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