

Repatriation in Classical Antiquity
Kenneth Lapatin
The J. Paul Getty Museum

Evolutionary models of technical and stylistic development employed by Greek and Latin authors and their celebration of the accomplishments of individual artisans have greatly influenced modern histories of ancient art, but ancient appreciation of so-called “works of art” was also based on other factors.

In antiquity, as today, artworks were portable. The movement of significant items, licit or illicit, rarely went unnoticed, for they were potent symbols of civic, religious, and cultural identity. Today, repatriation captures headlines, but the confiscation and restitution of artifacts in antiquity, too, were important enough to be recorded. I have collected over 50 examples. Artifacts were returned for diverse reasons, which provide an alternate lense through which we might interrogate the prevailing aesthetic frameworks of our art histories.

Some of the most famous artworks from classical antiquity are among those known to have been repatriated: the *Tyrannicides* at Athens and *Apollo Philesios* at Didyma, carried off by the Persians in the fifth century B.C., and the *Ajax* (plausibly associated with the *Belvedere Torso*) removed from Rhoiteion by Marc Antony in the first, were vital markers of civic identity. Subsequent conquerors, styling themselves as liberators, repatriated these and other items as shrewd political gestures to gain favor with “old” Greek states. Religious piety was behind the Numidian King Masinissa’s restitution of ivory tusks to the sanctuary of Juno Meleta. Popular outcry forced Tiberius to return Lysippos’ *Apoxyomenos*. And Praxiteles’ *Eros* at Thespieae traveled back and forth due to civic, religious, and economic pressures, including, apparently, tourism.