The Parthenon Sculpture
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The Acropolis

As early as at prehistoric times, people had already settled on a natural rocky hill, called later "the Acropolis", turning it into a strong fortress that protected the palace of the ruler, and the inhabitants in times of danger. During the Geometric period (8th century B.C.) the Acropolis ceased to be a fortress and became the Sanctuary of Athena and the religious centre of the city. In the Archaic times (6th century B.C.) the first great temples were built. Many votives, especially statues, were dedicated in the Sanctuary.

In the middle of the 5th century B.C., a great building programme was initiated, inspired mainly by the famous politician Pericles. The surface of the Sanctuary was expanded from 25,000 m² to 34,000 m². By the end of the 5th century the construction of the Parthenon, the Propylaia -the monumental entrance to the Sanctuary- the Erechtheion and the temple of Athena Nike had all been completed. Lesser Sanctuaries, altars, and secular buildings were added and the Sanctuary was embellished by hundreds of dedications.
The Acropolis Museum

The Acropolis Museum is situated right below the Sacred Rock, 300 metres from the Parthenon. The exhibits and the location played a significant part in the architectural planning of the building, which comprises a tripart composition with **base, main body and crown**.

The base acquired a special form, adapted to the archaeological excavation on the site, which was incorporated into the museum. Thus the building gives the feeling that it is suspended, since it is supported on columns, forming an impressive casing for the excavation.

The main body of the building has a glass sheath with metal fins on the east and west sides. A rectangular built core, measuring 60 by 20 m., just as the Parthenon cella, rises through the building from the ground level to the top.
The crown of the building, the Parthenon Gallery, is in the form of an enormous glass hall that conforms with the measurements and orientation of the temple itself, thus deviating from the orientation of the rest of the building. The glass surfaces that surround it assure suitable lighting for the Parthenon sculpture and also provide a direct view of the Acropolis. Both the original sculptures and the casts of the missing pieces are exhibited in positions analogous to their original locations on the temple. Thus a complete exhibition of all the preserved sculptures of the temple is possible, together with a unique environment for understanding the values represented by the monument itself.
The Parthenon was built between 447 and 438 B.C., by the architects Iktinos and Kallikrates. The famous sculptor Pheidias, a personal friend of Pericles, had general responsibility for supervising the entire project.

It is a **Doric temple with many Ionic features**. It was made of white Pentelic marble, being some 70 meters long, 31 meters wide and 15 meters high.

It is surrounded by a peristyle, having 8 columns across each narrow end and 17 columns along each of its long sides. The cella, the central closed part of the temple, was divided into two compartments which did not communicate with each other. The great, 13 metres high, **gold and ivory statue of the goddess Athena**, famous work by Pheidias, was housed in the east compartment. A Doric, two-tiered colonnade enframed the statue. In the west compartment, there were 4 Ionic columns. The cella had in addition a second row of 6 Doric columns, east and west. The monument had in total 108 columns outside and inside.

The richness of the sculptural decoration of the Parthenon was unique. There are three basic sculptural groups: **the pediments, the metopes and the frieze**.
The History of the Temple

From the building of the Parthenon some 25 centuries have passed. The temple has endured many vicissitudes. The first great catastrophe occurred at the end of the 4th century A.D. and was caused by conflagration. Then many of the sculptures were cut off the temple. During the 6th century A.D. the Parthenon was converted to a church. In Medieval times it was known as the Panaghia the Atheniotissa (the Virgin of Athens). After 1205 it fell into the hands of the Franks of the 4th Crusade and became a church of the Latin faith. In 1458, the Ottoman Turks seized Athens and converted the great temple to a Mohammedan precinct. During the campaign of Francesco Morosini against the Turks in Athens in 1687, a large section of the temple was destroyed by an explosion. From that time on, the temple suffered systematic looting, especially at the hands of Lord Elgin who, making use of the conditions of the time, soon after 1800, violently removed and carried off all the sculptures he could. They are today in the British Museum.

The Parthenon continues today to dominate the modern megalopolis. The Greek state is carrying out an original programme of conservation and restoration in order to make the temple more accessible to everyone.

Look for the back part of the south friezeblock III, from which Lord Elgin’s henchmen broke off the front surface with the relief; a copy is exhibited in the Museum.
The themes of the pediments are drawn from the myths of the goddess Athena. The east pediment, above the entrance to the temple, depicted the birth of the goddess Athena from the head of Zeus, in the presence of all the Olympian gods. Most of the central figures of the pediment are not preserved. In the middle was the figure of Zeus, next to Athena and Hephaistos who, according to the myth, opened the head of Zeus with an axe, so that the goddess could be born. Beside them were depicted Hera, Poseidon, Hermes, Ares and Apollo.

Have you considered how the particular traits of Athena, goddess of Wisdom, are connected with her supernatural birth?
The scene of the birth of Athena is framed at each end of the pediment by the chariot of the rising Helios, the sun, and that of the setting Selene, the moon, showing that the birth occurred at the dawn. To the left is Dionysos reclining and beside him sitting, Demeter and her daughter, Persephone. Next is the goddess Artemis, standing. In the right wing of the pediment there is a group of three seated divinities, Hestia, Dione and her lovely daughter Aphrodite, who stretches out languidly in her mother’s arms.

The pediments are the triangular areas formed by the sloping and horizontal cornices of the roof over the two narrow ends of the temple. Within these were the outstanding sculptures of the Parthenon, colossal statues carved in the round (437-432 B.C.). Each pediment was 28.50 meters long and the figures in the centre rose to a height of some 3.30 meters.
In the west pediment was depicted the contest between Athena and Poseidon for the claim to the Attic land. Athena won and the city was named Athens. Shown in the middle are the two divinities with their gifts, Athena with her olive tree and Poseidon with the salty water of the sea. They are framed by the two chariots that brought them to the contest, with Nike and Poseidon’s wife, Amphitrite, respectively, as charioteers. Behind, the two Olympian messengers, Iris and Hermes, arrive to proclaim the outcome of the contest.

Try to imagine the image of Athens if, in the contest between the two divinities, Poseidon had been the victor.
To the left, the mythical king Kekrops, his daughter Pandrossos and his son Erysichthon watch the competition. To the right, is sitting Oreithya, the daughter of Erechtheus, framed by her twin sons. Half-reclining figures in the two wings of the pediment, define the location with the personification of the river Kephissos and the Kallirrhoe spring, as well as the other Attic river, the Ilissos.
The metopes are above the external colonnades of the temple. They consist of 92 square plaques each approximately 1.35 x 1.35 m., decorated in relief. They alternate with the triglyphs. They were the first parts of the entablature to receive sculptural decoration (445-440 B.C.). They are carved in such high relief that they are almost sculpture in the round. The subjects depicted were drawn from Greek mythology. Most of the metopes show the favorite theme of ancient Greek art, the struggle. Thus, on the east end were scenes of the Gigantomachy, the battle between the Olympian gods and the Giants; on the west the Amazonomachy was shown, the fight between the Greeks and the Amazons, a mythical tribe of female warriors.
The north side depicted events of the Trojan War, especially the Sack of Troy. The theme of twenty-three of the metopes along the south side is the Centauromachy. The nine central metopes depict other subjects. The Centaurs, who had been invited to the wedding of the king of the Thessalian Lapiths, became inebriated and when they tried to carry off the Lapith women a hand-to-hand battle ensued.
The frieze encircled the outer side of the cella at a height of 12 metres above its base. It had a total length of 160 metres and was around one metre high. It was created between 442-438 B.C. and comprised 115 blocks with continuous reliefs of men and animals in motion. The relief was exceedingly low, with its greatest height around 6 centimetres.

Rich colours and metal attachments once embellished the figures, which stood out in relief from a deep blue background. The theme depicted was the procession to the Acropolis that took place during the Great Panathenaia, the festival in honour of the goddess Athena. This festival comprised a variety of events, including artistic and athletic contests as well as the great procession to the Acropolis.

Included in the composition were 378 figures, gods, heroes of the city, "archons" (officials), citizens, men and women, children, youths and elders and more than 200 animals, mainly horses, but bulls and rams as well. The procession began in two groups from the southwest corner of the frieze and continued along the long sides to meet at the east.
Most scholars who have studied the west frieze believe that it depicts the preparation of the Panathenaic procession that took place in the Kerameikos. The procession moves from right to left. Calm scenes alternate with scenes of vigorous action. Horsemen and horses are illustrated in various positions. Some horsemen are conversing, some are binding their sandals, others are bridling their horses.

On this side of the building, each scene unfolds within the borders of a single block, thus raising the possibility that it may have been carved on the ground and subsequently mounted on the building.
The procession on the north frieze moves from right to left. The first section of the procession shows sixty horsemen, their horses overlapping each other, thus creating several levels. Here the files of horsemen form ten groups. The first in each group, as a rule, is the one whose horse is shown completely free without overlapping. Marvelous variety is evident not only in the movements, especially of the heads, but also in the gestures, in the footgear, the headgear and the clothing. The young riders are sometimes portrayed nude, sometimes clad in a short chiton or in full dress or even panoply.
The next group shows the apobates race. This was one of the Panathenaic contests and goes as follows: there is a race of quadrigas (four-horse chariots) with charioteer and hoplite. During the course, the hoplite must dismount and mount again the racing chariot. Twelve chariots are depicted on the north side of the frieze. Next comes the sacrificial procession. Ahead march the animals to be sacrificed, four bulls and four rams with their drivers. Included are also thallophoroi (old men holding olive branches), musicians, hydriaphoroi (youths carrying heavy jars with water) and skaphephoroi (youths bearing offering trays).
On the south frieze the procession moves from left to right. It starts with the marshal who is supervising the festival. Then comes again a cavalcade of sixty horsemen. Evident is the division of the horsemen into ten groups of six each, distinguished by the difference in their dress. They are probably grouped by tribe, corresponding to the political organisation of the Athenian state. All the horses are shown in profile, some proceeding calmly, some running, some struggling.
Next follows the file of chariots which is fragmentarily preserved because of the bombardment and explosion of the temple in 1687. Ten chariots are taking part, each of which occupies a single block. The chariot was drawn on two wheels which supported the body of the chariot. The horses were yoked by means of a strong pole, the shaft that was attached to the centre of the wheel axle. The charioteer drove the team. The blocks that follow illustrate the sacrificial procession. Ten bulls accompanied by three drivers each, are here depicted. They are followed again by thallophoroi, musicians and skaphephoroi.

Note the damage and wear suffered by the marbles and try to imagine the causes.
The sacrificial procession continues to the east frieze where the two groups of the procession come together. It is the most sacred side of the temple. Here no sacrificial animals are shown, but only gods and mortals. This is, moreover, the only side of the temple on which women are shown participating. They are carrying ceremonial vessels for the sacrifice, oinochoai (jugs), phialai (shallow bowls), incense burners and other utensils. Depicted in the middle of the east side, above the entrance to the temple, is the culmination of the festival, the handing over of the "peplos", a new robe, the gift of the Athenians to the ancient heaven-sent wooden cult statue of Athena housed in the Erechtheion. Five figures appear in the central scene. Three females, two carrying the sacred stools and a larger one, perhaps a priestess who leads them. A reverent male figure, probably the Archon-King and a boy hold the peplos.
To the left and right of the peplos scene, are illustrated the twelve Olympian gods, seated and larger than the other figures, thus proclaiming their divine nature. First to the left, sits Hermes with his petasos upon his knees, and his herald's staff. Next to him, Dionysos holds a thyrsos (a wooden staff wound round with ivy and vine leaves). Then comes Demeter with her torch and Ares with his javelin. Zeus sits upon a throne and holds his sceptre; next to him are depicted his wife Hera and Iris, the messenger of the gods. To the right of the central scene, the venerated goddess Athena is seated. On her knees she holds the aegis, an apotropaic goatskin; in her right hand is her spear. Next to her sit Hephaistos leaning on his club, Poseidon holding his trident, Apollo crowned, a laurel branch in his hand, Artemis, with her bow and Aphrodite with her son, Eros.
During your visit to the Acropolis Museum, do not forget to see ...
... an ancient neighbourhood of Athens, that was occupied continuously from prehistoric to Byzantine times. It came to light in the excavation carried out in the Makriyianni lot and it was incorporated as an exhibit in the Acropolis Museum. The houses, baths, shops and workshops of the ancient city found beneath the Museum, together with the sculpture, pottery, coins and other finds from the excavation, inform us about the daily life of ancient Athens.
... a loutrophoros, (5th century B.C.), illustrating a wedding procession. It comes from an open-air Sanctuary dedicated to Nympha, a local divinity of Athens, patroness of marriage. Loutrophoroi were luxurious, tall, slender vessels in which water for the nuptial bath was brought from the Kallirrhoe spring. After the wedding, the vases were dedicated in the Sanctuary of Nympha. The scenes on them were mythological or relevant to the wedding.

... part of a woman’s face with votive eyes (350-300 B.C.), a dedicatory oblation from the Sanctuary of Asklepios, god of healing. It was found set into a stone stele and it was the offering of a believer, whose name was Praxias, for his wife. What distinguishes it are the inlaid eyes with their lively, intent gaze.

... the young woman (late 1st century B.C.), who is represented in an active dancing pose. It was found in the Theatre of Dionysos and may have been applied to a base holding a bronze tripod.

Find in the Museum the ‘hoard’ of the Sanctuary of Aphrodite Ourania, where the newly-wed threw a silver drachm in order to assure a fertile and happy married life.

Have you seen comparable modern offerings from worshippers in the churches?
... the sculpture of the enormous poros pediment (around 570 B.C.), from the archaic Parthenon. Occupying the centre are two lions rending a bull. To the left Herakles struggles with Triton, a mythical sea daimon with the body of a man and a snakey fish-tail. At the right is shown the Tri-bodied sea daimon, perhaps Nereus, comprised of three figures, human to the waist, and snakes from the waist down. The three figures represent bearded men with large wings, the first holding a thunderbolt, the second the symbol of water and the third a bird.
... the marble group of the Gigantomachy (around 525 or 508/7 B.C.), the mythical battle between the Olympian gods and the Giants, children of Earth, from the east pediment of the "Archaios Naos", the "Ancient Temple". The goddess Athena, protector of the city and the Sanctuary, with her spear in her right hand, moves to attack the giant Engelados, personification of earthquakes, of which figure only one leg remains. The goddess threateningly extends her left arm, which is completely covered by her snake-bordered aegis. To the right, a Giant falls backwards. Two other Giants, kneeling each on one knee, fill the corners of the pediment.
... the statue of the **Moschophoros** (570 B.C.). Represented is a bearded youth carrying on his shoulders a calf to be offered to the goddess Athena. His face comes alive with a smile and his once-inlaid eyes.

On the base of the statue an inscription is preserved, written from right to left, stating that “Rhombos dedicated the statue, the son of Palos”. Can you read it?

... the **Peplophoros** (530 B.C.) who owes her name to the garment she wears. The peplos is held on her shoulders by brooches and it hangs with a fold a bit above the waist where it is belted. The red coloured wavy hair, the bright eyes and pleasant smile give life and joy to this well-formed youth-ful figure.

Observe the colour that is preserved on the hair, the eyes and the garment.
the Kritios Boy (480 B.C.), a statue of a youth that is attributed to the sculptor Kritios. It is a most important work showing the transition from the archaic to the classical style. The boy stands on his left leg and steps forward with his right, with knee relaxed. Thus the immobile and static stance that had existed up to that time, gives way to a more natural and relaxed pose.

... the lifesize bronze head of a hoplite (480-470 B.C.), which is an original work by a great Aeginetan sculptor, as is indicated by the especially well-formed facial features, beard and moustache.

Did you know that athletes and heroes were usually depicted nude?

In your opinion, which of the two was the Kritios boy?

Many of the most beautiful sculptures were made of bronze.

Look for some of these in the Museum.
... Hermes Propylaios (1st century A.D.). This is a Herm. It is a Roman copy of a work by the famous sculptor Alkamenes (430 B.C.). Herms were stelai that usually held at the top the head of the god Hermes, protector of travellers. They were placed beside roads and at the entrances to Sanctuaries or houses.

... the Caryatids (420-409 B.C.), the six maidens (Korai) that supported the roof of the south porch of the Erechtheion in place of columns. The porch is thought to have been the grave monument of the tomb of Kekrops and the Korai the cup-bearers who honoured the illustrious dead.

Observe the folds of the garments, which resemble the fluting of columns.

What do you think the Caryatids held in their hands?
With the Sandalbinder there are Nikai (Victories) who run, their wings spread, others who lead animals to sacrifice and still others who set up trophies to honour the goddess. Can you distinguish them?

... the Sandalbinding Nike (end of the 5th century B.C.), who bends down to arrange her sandal and is one of the most beautiful sculptures of the Athena Nike temple. She comes from the relief-decorated parapet that surrounded the temple in order to protect the worshippers.

... the portrait of Alexander the Great (336 B.C.), portraying him as a young man, probably a work by the sculptor Leochares. It was carved when Alexander made his only visit to Athens, after the defeat of the Athenians and their allies, in the battle of Chaironeia.
Play with the frieze on the internet! http://www.parthenonfrieze.gr