

But How can You Read if There aren't Any Words?

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Take a look at the following image:

<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/...parthenos9901110008.jpg>

This is a model from the Royal Ontario Museum of an ancient Greek statue. What can you say about it? It's of a woman in armour; she's holding a shield to her left with a helmet on head. What else – she seems stiff? Aloof? What more can you say? When looking at images like this (and it could be a statue, a painting or piece of art) most people tend to do just that – look. They can take in the image and describe it, and then likely say whether they like it or not, but in order to understand a piece of art, one has to do more than look at it. A proper analysis involves reading the image.

Art is a physical manifestation of a language, the language of art. Like any language it has its own vocabulary, grammar and syntax, all of which get put together like a sentence. Sentences then make up a paragraph and so on until all the constituent parts are put together to make the whole. In order to understand this whole, several interpretive strategies can be used as we read the image. Some of these have little to do with the image itself, but how it was found – its archaeological context. Hopefully when excavated and its context analyzed, the archaeologist can provide us with information concerning chronology (what is the piece's date) and provenance (its place of origin). From there we can start to look at the image itself.

One of the most important things to consider is the style of an object. Style essentially is the way a piece of art looks. Often this is a function of the time in which the art was produced. The original of the statue you looked at was produced during the age of Pericles at Athens, the great Classical age of Greece, and so the statue is said to represent the Classical style of Greek art. Many statues of the same time period have the timeless, aloof, and ideal qualities that this statue has. Most important for the reading of a piece is an understanding of its iconography. Literally this means “writing the image” (get it? reading?) and it involves the analysis of symbols associated with the image. If you see a red octagonal sign, you associate it with the meaning “stop”. Also, if you see a totem pole you can look at the images carved on it and associate them with specific myths and stories and even a specific Nation. Look at the statue again. The symbols associated with it are the shield and spear, the helmet, the woman and the small statue she holds in her right hand. When you add all of these up, you discover that this is likely a statue of the city's patron warrior goddess Athena. In fact this is a model of the great Athena Parthenos statue that stood inside the Parthenon. This is important as we now have a provenance which helps in our reading of the iconography. Take a look at this image:

<http://66.66.131.145/roman/Nashville/athena02.jpg>

This is a close up of the shield the statue holds and it reveals a series of relief sculptures

all over. They represent a series of female figures attacking men as they defend a city. This story depicts a battle with the Amazons – a powerful myth for the Greeks that often represented their society’s triumph over “barbarian” peoples. There are representations of Amazons on the outside of the Parthenon and so this provides a thematic link between the inside of the temple and the outside. More specifically though, the Athenians had a myth involving the Amazons coming right up to the gates of the city and being repelled by the hero Theseus. This provides a specific reference not to Greek triumphs, but to Athenian. Two of the Greeks on the shield are also echoes of a famous statue group at Athens representing Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the famous “Tyrant Slayers” who help usher in the age of democracy. This then provides a visual link to modern Athenian history. It was also said that the sculptor Pheidias put his and Pericles’ faces on two of the Greeks on the shield (a definite no-no), which would then place the two in this historical tradition. All of this is to say that our reading shows prominent historical and propagandistic meanings for this statue, in addition to a religious meaning.

This is all fine and well, but you may be asking yourself “why aren’t we actually looking at the real statue?” Well, sometimes reading a piece of art, especially from older periods, involves actual reading. The Athena Parthenos statue was likely destroyed by a fire that did much damage to the Parthenon in the 3rd c. CE, though various individuals had done more or less damage to the statue over the years. Luckily we have the accounts of various Greek and Roman commentators (Pliny the Elder, Pausanias, Plutarch and others), who either visited the statue themselves on their travels, or who knew enough of this famous statue to record what it looked like. By reading these accounts of the statue we can get a good idea of its appearance. We also have several “copies” of the Athena Parthenos statue that were done over the years. In the same way that you might have a copy of the Mona Lisa or some other famous piece of art in your home, so the Greeks and Romans made copies of famous works of art. Take a look at this statue:

http://webpages.ursinus.edu/classics/Myth/varvakeion_athena.htm

The statue is referred to as the Varvakeion Athena since it was found near the town of Varvakeion in Greece. It dates to the 2nd c. CE and is a Roman version of the Athena Parthenos. There are a few differences between this statue and the literary accounts, however, and so we have to look at as many copies as possible and in the aggregate decide which features are true to the original statue. When we then look at all the evidence together (the literary accounts, the later copies of the statue, any archaeological evidence) we can then reconstruct what the statue looked like. That can either be like the model from the ROM or it can be like the following:

<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/...2B1-Athena-Model.jpg>

This is a life-size replica of the Athena Parthenos statue that was made in Nashville Tennessee in 1990 and it was made with the help of several scholars who analyzed all of the evidence surrounding the original. It is said that this statue is faithful to the original to within three millimeters.

Ultimately reading a statue in this way is done in an effort to understand the piece’s

meaning, cause and context. It's always difficult to try and get inside an artist's head and figure out "why" s/he did something and "what" s/he meant by something, but by analyzing works in the brief way that we have, we can try and get close. We can all look at a piece of art and decide whether we like it or not - and that's fine - but it does little in terms of trying to understand it. Why is it important? What is it trying to say? How is it trying to say it? What did it mean to the people who created it? All of these questions can only be attempted when one stops looking at a piece of art and starts to read it. Try it the next time you see a piece like this and you will likely get a better sense of understanding and enjoyment from it. You may even find that it's a better read than some of the books you've had to look at ...