

The Legacy of the Parthenon

Oddly enough, the Parthenon was not considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.¹ To our modern sensibilities and academic curiosity, this seems like a gross oversight. In our modern view, the Parthenon is often seen as the pinnacle of ancient Greek temple construction, the apex of a tradition that resonates down into our own architectural past.



The Parthenon (Athens, Greece)

Constructed between 447 and 432 BCE, the ancient Athenians saw the Parthenon in two ways. In the first place it was a temple to their patron goddess Athena, replacing an older temple that had been

¹ For the seven wonders of the ancient world, see <http://library.thinkquest.org/C0123829/>

destroyed by the Persians. As such, it was there to honour and praise the goddess in her manifestation as a virgin (*parthena*) deity. Secondly, and of equal importance, was to see this building as a unique manifestation of Athenian culture and power. The care and attention paid to the architecture, with its numerous optical refinements, and to the sculpture that adorns it all reflect the “golden age” of Periklean Athens. The finest artists of the day were employed, all under the watchful eye of the master Pheidias, to create the multitudinous sculpture that hangs off the building “like an overly decorated wedding cake”, as a friend of mine once put it. Whether it is the symbolic art of the metopes, the battle of gods vs. giants, the Greeks vs. the Amazons, etc. – that all represent the triumph of Greek culture over the barbarous east, especially the defeat of the Persians at the hands of the Athenians, or the more literal art of the Ionic frieze that shows the Athenians celebrating the great festival of Athena, the sculpture of the Parthenon was the physical manifestation of Perikles’ cultural goal of making Athens the envy of the world.²

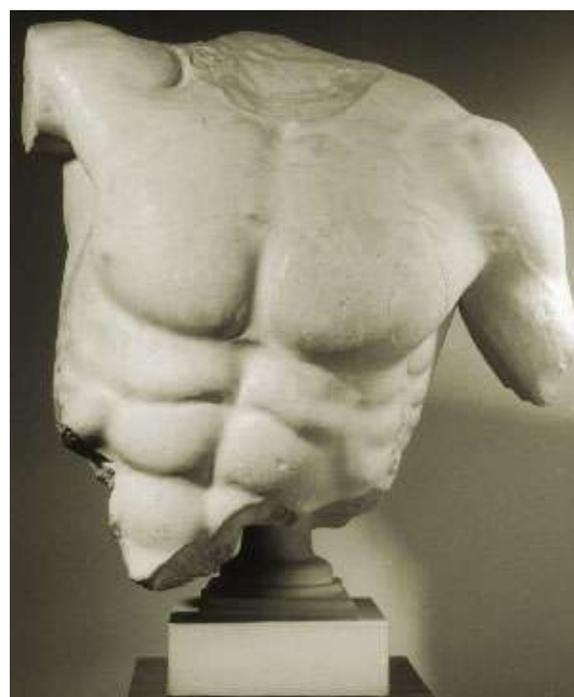
In this, Perikles largely succeeded. We are not the only ones who look back to Classical Athens as a golden age of literature and the arts. Even after Athens had lost its empire and had ceased to be a fully independent city state after the Macedonian conquests, Greeks looked back to the Parthenon as a unique symbol of Greek cultural power. Among the first to consciously look back to fifth century Athens were the Attalids of Pergamon. Having carved out a small kingdom in the third century BCE on what today would be the western coast of Turkey, the Attalids were soon faced with a deadly threat – invasion from the Celtic people known as the Gauls. These Gauls, with spiked hair, body paint and fearsome countenance, attacked Pergamon but were defeated by the Greek (culturally) Attalids. They then saw this as a parallel to the Athenian defeat of the Persians and so began a conscious campaign to show themselves as a “new” Athens, with all of the cultural greatness that that implied. To this end,

² For an in-depth look at the Parthenon, see <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/Parthenon.htm>

the Attalids built a great altar to the god Zeus that was covered in sculpture depicting the battle of the gods vs. the giants – just like the Parthenon had. They even had several direct “quotations” of the Parthenon, as you can see below. The body of Zeus from the altar was based on the body of Poseidon from the Parthenon’s West pediment. This very conscious borrowing was meant to invoke the Parthenon in the viewer’s mind and so have Pergamon permanently linked with the glory that was Athens.³



Figure of Zeus from the Altar of Zeus (Pergamon)



Reconstructed Torso of Poseidon (Parthenon)

There were many other examples of such borrowing from the Parthenon in antiquity – too numerous to mention here – suffice to say that the ancient Greeks and indeed the ancient Romans all looked back to the Parthenon as a singular monument that reflected a time, place and ideas that many wanted to emulate. This notion continued well into modern times. After the Renaissance and Enlightenment, several of the “great nations” of the day (England, France, Germany, etc) became

³ For the Attalid kingdom, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attalid_dynasty

interested in claiming a classical past themselves. If they could establish a link to the glory that was the ancient world, then they too would be able to claim the cultural superiority that the ancients themselves proclaimed. Some of this was done in adopting Classical forms, in architecture, art or literature, while some was done by looking to the new field of archaeology. By excavating Greece and Italy, these people could actively find material from the Classical past. Most famously, this was done by Lord Elgin. Elgin was the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire (then in charge of Athens) who “purchased” several pieces of sculpture from the now ruined Parthenon. Between 1801 and 1805, Elgin’s agents took multiple pieces from the Parthenon and then shipped the back to London, where they remain on display in the British Museum. These so-called “Elgin Marbles” have remained controversial to this day. They were taken by Elgin as a means of illustrating Britain’s links, and so similarities, to the great Classical past of the Greeks – literally taking possession of Greek culture. After the modern Greek state was formed in 1832, the Greeks questioned the legality and authority that Elgin had in removing part of their cultural heritage. To this day, the question of the Elgin marbles remains a contentious issue: did Elgin “save” the art by removing it from a war torn land whose ability to preserve and promote the material to the world couldn’t match that of the UK? Or did Elgin “pillage” the cultural heritage of Greece solely in an effort to promote the Imperial aspirations of Britain that denied Greece of its rightful property? The debate remains, but it is an important one that has far reaching implications for museums around the world that have material from other cultures.⁴ If nothing else, it shows that the importance of the Parthenon as cultural symbol survives to this very day.

⁴ For the Elgin Marbles and the important debates surrounding their acquisition and possible return to Greece, see <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/LX/ElginMarbles.html>



The Panathenaic Frieze, Part of the “Elgin Marbles” (British Museum, London, UK)

This kind of borrowing from the Parthenon doesn't have to have such far reaching consequences as the debate over the Elgin marbles. The largest scale borrowing that has ever occurred is the 1:1 replica of the Parthenon that was built in Nashville, Tennessee. It all started with the Tennessee's centennial exhibition of 1897, when several ancient buildings were re-created to celebrate Nashville's moniker of “The Athens of the South”. The building was made permanent in 1931 when a decision was made to create an exact replica of the original Parthenon, right down to the colossal statue of Athena on the inside. This went beyond merely cultural borrowing to have Nashville stand in as a “new” Athens like Pergamon, but involved such issues as tourism (“why go to Greece when the Parthenon is right here?”) and even academia. Several important scholars worked with the trustees to create as accurate a recreation as possible. This Parthenon was one where scholars of Classical art got to be a link in the chain with the very material that they had devoted a lifetime to studying.⁵

⁵ For the Nashville Parthenon, see <http://www.nashville.gov/parthenon/>



The “Parthenon” (Nashville, Tennessee, USA)

The whole legacy of the Parthenon is so much more than a mere interest in Classical architecture. If you look around your own home town you will find numerous buildings (especially banks!) that have been built in a Classical style, with majestic columns and symmetrical forms. Aside from the aesthetics, the reason is because the style lends an air of solemnity, seriousness and cultural elegance that many associate with a Classical past. And when you think of the Classical past, perhaps the very first image that comes to mind is the Parthenon. It is less the physicality of the Parthenon that is important – many Classical temples can be seen as forerunners to contemporary architecture done in a Classical style – than the meanings of that physicality. These meanings range from the specific (we’re better than the Persians) to the general (we’re cultured) and the recreation of these forms in a different

context ties one to these meanings and illustrates a shared cultural heritage that is consciously invoked. That can be as grandiose as the Pergamene Altar of Zeus, or one of my favourite manifestations – when I was in Savannah, Georgia a few years ago I went on a tour of several of the historic mansions of the town. Imagine my surprise when one of them (now a museum) contained a recreation of the Parthenon’s Panathenaic frieze around the top of the ceiling. What was this doing here? One didn’t need to be a king or a country to attach oneself to the Parthenon. Even a wealthy southern gentleman could show how cultured he and his family were by recreating a piece of the Parthenon in his home. He was illustrating how one could tie oneself, visually, to the whole of Classical antiquity and all the cultural refinement that went a long with it by invoking the seminal monument that encapsulated a moment in time when the ancient Athenians first felt the need to express that greatness themselves. To then have that notion follow western culture down throughout the ages – that is the true legacy of the Parthenon.



(Savannah, Georgia, USA)