

THE ATHENA PARTHENOS: FANTASIA AND REALITY

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The Parthenon was the most unusual temple in Classical Athens. In its size, material, proportions, sculptural decoration and extraordinarily large interior space, it was unlike anything seen previously on the mainland of Greece. Although scholars have variously explained these **anomalies**, most agree that the odd design features were



meant to accommodate the Parthenon's centerpiece, a statue of **Athena Parthenos** ("The Virgin"), over 40 feet tall [*pic*], constructed of **gold and ivory** (called "chryselephantine") and ornamented with precious metals, paint, and glass. The Parthenon can, in fact, be seen less as a traditional temple (*no cult activity is known to have been performed there*) than as a suitable architectural setting for Athena's most spectacular material apparition – a work that cost more to set up than the **Parthenon** itself.

The Parthenos was conceived and constructed by **Pheidias**, the sculptor who was a supervisor of works under **Perikles**. His closeness to the Athenian statesman led to his banishment from Athens on false charges. Leaving Athens for Olympia, he built for the Zeus temple there an equally huge gold and ivory statue that was later listed among the **7 wonders of the ancient world**. Pheidias drew his fame chiefly from these two chryselephantine colossi.

The Roman rhetorician **Quintilian** said of Pheidias, "[He] is credited with being more skillful at making images of gods than of men, and in working in ivory he is thought to be far beyond any rival and would be so even if he had made nothing besides his **Athena** in Athens and his **Olympian Zeus** in Elis, the beauty of which seems to have added something to traditional religion; to such an extent is the **majesty of the beauty equal to the majesty of the god.**"

How was Pheidias able to make such suitable images of divine, and thus invisible, power? This question was pondered already by ancient philosophers, as seen in this dialogue related by **Philostratus**:

"Did artists like Pheidias...after going up to heaven and making mechanical copies of the forms of the gods then represent them by their art, or was there something else that stood in attendance upon them in making their sculpture?. "Phantasia (imagination) wrought these, an artificer much wiser than imitation. For imitation will represent that which can be seen with the eyes, but phantasia will represent that which cannot."

It was, then, the ability of Pheidias to imagine the unseeable and to commit it to material form that accounted for his status as the **greatest of Greek sculptors**. Today we can see the fruits of his **phantasia** in the **marble sculptures of the Parthenon**, now mostly divided between Athens and London, over which he had final authority. These carved pediments, metopes, and friezes play out the timeless stories of Greek mythology – centaurs, amazons, gods and giants, the sack of Troy, and the exploits of Athena and her Olympian family. **These were not mere ornaments**. They embodied the basic principles and conflicts that defined Greek civilization, especially as contrasted with the hated barbarian Persians, recently defeated by Athenian forces against impossible odds. Many, in fact, believe the Parthenon to be a **victory monument** for the Persian wars, set up a generation after the fact.

We are certainly most fortunate to have the *Parthenon Marbles*, even fragmented and scattered, for otherwise we would have no way to imagine the style of Pheidias' greater accomplishment – the *Athena Parthenos*. Not surprising for a statue of precious materials, it has disappeared without a trace. Its pose, its garment, and its attributes can be identified from ancient descriptions and small replicas. However, the *style* of rendering - the sweep of the drapery, the line of her nose and brow, or the soft surfaces of her cheeks and lips – one has to imagine from the forms of the architectural marbles. These sculptures display a pure beauty that transfixes the viewer with their melding of **timeless idealism with vivid realism**. Small wonder that the ancients invoked **divine inspiration** as an explanation for the perfection of this style, and that each succeeding generation has revered the culture that produced it as the **acme of Western Civilization**. So from the reality of the remains, we can conjure a *phantasia* of the magnificent original. Of the numerous modern reconstructions of **Pheidias' masterpiece**, the most impressive is surely the full-size and fully colored version that stands in **Nashville's Parthenon**, [*pic page 15*], itself a full-scale concrete replica of the **Periklean marvel**. Only from a work of this size can we understand how one would have seen the various subjects portrayed in painting and sculpture on the *Parthenos*, adorning the inside and outside surfaces of her shield and the soles of her sandals; these repeated the themes of the architectural sculpture on the building's exterior, reinforcing the relationship between Parthenon and Parthenos as setting and statue. Of the myths portrayed on the Parthenos, only one is found only there and nowhere else on the Parthenon-nowhere else, in fact, in Classical sculpture. In golden relief against the bright marble statue base Pheidias depicted the **Birth of Pandora**.

As one can verify in **Nashville**, this would have been by far the most conspicuous and legible part of the whole. The selection of this subject has puzzled scholars, although most agree that its moral of disobedience and punishment was meant to underscore the limits of human power in a divinely ordained universe – a warning against the excesses of Classical humanism. But it is **Pandora's** creation that is shown, not her transgression. Modeled from clay and given life by the divine craftsman **Hephaistos**, [*and certainly that god's crowning achievement*], she can stand also for the **power of the sculptor's** craft. While Perikles' Parthenon was conceived as a monument to the greatness of the **Athenian democracy**, Pheidias' Parthenos was executed as a **monument to art itself**.