



Athena Parthenos in Nashville and Athens

The Parthenon on the acropolis in Athens was an architectural and sculptural masterpiece, with soaring columns, a spacious cella, figured metopes, friezes and pedimental sculptures. Unfortunately, what remains on the acropolis now, after the passage of over 2400 years (with consequent erosion and pollution damage), conversion to a church, a mosque and, most disastrously, an ammunition dump, and dispersion of much of the art to world museums, is a pale image of what once was. The only positive gain as a result of the deterioration of the marble (mainly from the rusting of iron reinforcing rods) is that archaeologists working on restorations have had to take the temple apart block by block and have often discovered new facts about the building - e.g., evidence for some windows, a stairway inside to the second level, a small shrine in one of the colonnades.

One of the striking features of the temple was the huge (40 foot plus 2 foot base) statue of Athena Parthenos in the cella, the height of which space was made possible by imposing a second row of Doric columns above a ground-level Pi-shaped row. The second level was needed to reach that height because single Doric columns that tall (because of the height to diameter relation of a Doric column) would have made bases so big there would have been no room left in cella for people.

For those who cannot get to Athens or who want to see what the Parthenon building and the Athena statue would have looked like in 5th century BC, an option now exists: the Parthenon reconstructed in Nashville. Of course, the setting is not the same: the sun is not the Greek sun, the temple is not located on an imposing hill in the middle of Athens and surrounded by many other Greek structures (including the Erechtheum and the great Entrance Gates) and the material of the building is concrete rather than marble. But the Nashville Parthenon has most of the original sculpted/relief work replicated and the colors originally applied to the Athenian Parthenon duplicated in its modern descendant.

The Nashville Parthenon arose from a combination of the fact that the city has long called itself "the Athens of the South" and that a replica of the Parthenon built there for the Tennessee centennial became so popular that, when the centennial building was deteriorating because it had been built out of non-durable materials, the citizens wanted it replaced with a more lasting monument. Hence the concrete Parthenon arose in Nashville, the details of which were checked carefully with the best scholars and archaeologists of the day.

In the cella of the temple was left a box for contributions "for the statue of Athena Parthenos" which the restorers had not been able to afford at the time of the temple construction. When the box was later opened and Nashville found that it had \$32,000 that it could not, by law, use for anything other than building the statue, the city decided to go ahead and commission the reconstruction, employing a young Nashville native as the sculptor. Professor Ridgway consulted with the sculptor on a regular basis while he worked on the statue from 1980 to its completion in 1988 and offered her expertise in art history (seen in her AJA paper on the helmet of the statue) to keep the project as faithful as possible in detail and spirit to the original by Pheidias.

The original statue was made of ivory and gold, 42 feet high and on a 2 foot base. The reconstruction would be of fiberglass, cast in plaster moulds made over a worked clay base. The sculptor, after experimenting with a ten-foot model, made the full-size statue in sections, building up clay over an armature, working all the details into the clay, and then applying plaster soaked strips over the clay. Once dry, the plaster moulds were removed and used for the casting of the statue. So much clay was required that the sculptor could not afford to buy it all at once, which was just as well, since the full weight of the clay would have collapsed his floor.

Since the original statue by Pheidias had long since disappeared, the replica was based on descriptions, coin representations, and smaller models sold in antiquity as souvenirs. These smaller models were made of marble, and therefore the sculptors of those had had to make some adaptations to the nature of marble, including the fact that you cannot have outstretched extremities unsupported. The original showed Athena, with her triple-crested crown on her head, her shield (showing the battle of the Athenians with the Amazons) down at her left side, her spear at rest, her long, flowing robe overlaid by her Gorgon-headed aegis with serpent fringe, and, perched on her outstretched right hand, a winged Nike.

What impressed Professor Ridgway most about the reconstruction of the statue was that details that were practically lost in the smaller models were vivid and impressive in the full-scale statue. The Nike in Athena's hand looks almost tiny when seen in its full setting, but down on the ground it had towered over Professor in its larger-than-life-size grandeur. It was this sense of spatial relations - of the parts of the statue to the whole and to human scale and of the statue to the dimensions of the cella itself - that was one of the great gains of the making the reconstruction and putting it in place. When the Parthenon was re-opened for Nashville (and a host of dignitaries) with the statue in its proper place, the view of the statue through the huge doors of the cella, even from far outside, was awe-inspiring in its size and grandeur.

Although the relief figures on the base of statue were gilded, no attempt was made to do the same for the 40 foot statue itself. The sculptor settled for different colors to represent the original ivory and gold. He provided no column to support Athena's hand (since he used a cantilever to relieve the weight), and the Nike perches like a small bird there.

The subject of the Panathenaia had long been believed to be the birth of Athena, which is shown on one pediment of the Parthenon, but in fact it was probably the gods' victory over the giants, and especially Athena's role in that, which was memorialized, a conclusion substantiated by the figure of Athena on all the vases commemorating victors in the Panathenaia games. The figure of Athena who seems to be leaping about is actually dancing the Pyrrhic victory dance.
