

Clemente Marconi

THE PARTHENON AND THE CORE CURRICULUM

With our new digital tool, we can give our alumni a new vision of the building that differs from what they saw when they learned about the building the first time in Art Humanities. The Parthenon has been crucial to the Core Curriculum since the institution of Art Humanities. One reason for this is academic. One of the main scholars of the Parthenon, William Bell Dinsmoor, was one of the founders of our art history department. Dinsmoor was one of the most important twentieth-century scholars of Greek architecture. He wrote a book *The Architecture of Ancient Greece*, which is still the best discussion of the history of Greek architecture. In this book, he introduces the Parthenon as the culmination of classical architecture. According to Dinsmoor, everything that came before was only preparation, and everything after was only decadence, something of course nobody would say today. For Dinsmoor the Parthenon was without any question the most important achievement in classical architecture, not solely Greek architecture, and so the Parthenon was included in Art Humanities.

However, another reason for the Parthenon's inclusion in the Core was its significance in Western culture, and especially American culture, since the beginning of the nineteenth century. There are several buildings that were built in imitation of the Parthenon. One is the Second Bank of the United States in Philadelphia (1818-24); another is the Federal Building on Wall Street, once the Custom House (1833-42).

And it is not just that the Parthenon was a generic piece of classical architecture, but there was a very important ideological connection made as well between classical ideals in architecture and democracy. The idea was that the Parthenon was the most important achievement in ancient architecture because it was done at a time when the political system was democratic. Athens was seen as the cradle of democracy, a political system that made possible previously unthinkable achievements and accomplishments in architecture.

The reason why Dinsmoor was so fascinated with the Parthenon, and the reason why the Parthenon is so important for Art Humanities, is precisely the idea that it is democracy that nurtures these spectacles in architecture.

CURRENT STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE PARTHENON

Today the Parthenon is viewed in a completely different way by students because we are in a postcolonial age. Because Greek culture was an icon for the West in the age of colonialism, in the age of postcolonialism, Greek culture, Greek classical ideals and buildings like the Parthenon have come under fire, precisely because they are identified with a colonial culture.

Today, in a multicultural system of interpretation, the West plays a very important role but is viewed as just one among many other cultures that have shaped our world. The students no longer think that the Parthenon is the most important achievement in the history of architecture, and I'm very happy about this assessment. On the other hand they also believe the Parthenon is the origin of all sins of the West.

There is much that can be said about this particular perception, I believe. We should be careful not to confuse the original significance of the building with our interpretation of it. If in the past we have used the Parthenon to shape a conservative view of ourselves, this should not be blamed on the Parthenon itself, but on our modern interpretation.

I am delighted by the fact that the students believe that Egyptian pyramids or a medieval cathedral are as important as the Parthenon for the history of architecture. But I also tell them a different story about that building, and one which comes closer to its original significance.

DEMOCRACY IN ARCHITECTURE

There is no question that the traditional narrative about the Parthenon contained many distortions. The most important distortion was actually the connection made between the Parthenon and Pericles. Like an American president or a Roman emperor, until 10 or 15 years ago, Pericles was held responsible for the Parthenon and the whole Acropolis project. Today, however, we are rediscovering a side of the Parthenon that is very different from the traditional one.

What we are discovering is that the situation when the Parthenon was built was much more complicated than we had imagined. First, it was not just Pericles that was in charge of things. He was one of the Athenian officers who must have been involved in the construction of the Parthenon, but the belief in his paramount role in the construction of the building is an interpretation based on later Roman sources. What we know today is that buildings like the Parthenon were the result of a negotiation between different agents in the Athenian democracy. So, of course, there were officers like Pericles, but there were many others citizens of Athens who decided about architectural projects and we know that these projects, these buildings, were really the result of a negotiation between all these agents.

In this regard, the most interesting element of the Parthenon is the frieze, which for us is the most important part of the building. For ages we have thought that it was the first element to be

planned and designed by the architects and the sculptors. However, today we know that the frieze was not in the original plan, and that it was designed last, maybe even when the work on the building was well underway. The background for this is what happened to architectural projects in classical Athens. The decision to build a temple was taken, a committee was appointed that was in charge of selecting the best project, the project that was selected was presented to the council, which is a sort of senate, and to the assembly. It was these organs of Athenian democracy that made the final decision on the project. And they could propose changes—also very significant—so it all looks like the Parthenon was designed in a certain way, but in this process of submission to the council, to the assembly, a change was proposed regarding the frieze. So the most innovative part of the building didn't come out of the brain of Pericles or the architect, it was sort of a discussion in the middle of Athenian society.

And this is actually democracy in architecture. You don't have big names who build temples or skyscrapers, you actually have an architect, you have a committee, and you have people quarreling all the time about the building itself. So the building in the end is the ultimate result of all these controversies.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND TEACHING THE PARTHENON

I grew up in an old-fashioned world where you used photographs, black-and-white photographs, and slides, and even though I was aware of all these wonderful activities about digital teaching, I was very resistant until the end of this past August. Now that I am incorporating digital technology into my teaching, it has become absolutely fundamental. What it allows me to do in the classroom is to position buildings and images in the original urban and architectural context. This is the first step towards positioning these images in their cultural context, which is my primary interest of research. In teaching ancient art to students in New York, I notice that when they first come to class they believe that ancient art was meant to be displayed in museums. For them the idea of dealing with art that was not meant for collectors or museums is really a surprise and they are very fascinated by this idea, and even shocked. One of my first classes is all about the interaction between images and urban and architectural landscape. And though I was surprising them for four years, I didn't realize that it was especially through digital technology that I could shock them, and give them a sense of awe that with slides was simply impossible. With digital technology, you can teach the monuments in context, which is the way current scholarship on ancient art is done. This is particularly appropriate for the case of the Parthenon.

THE TRADITION OF GREEK ARCHITECTURE AT COLUMBIA

Columbia has a distinguished tradition of scholars on Greek architecture. I have already mentioned Dinsmoor. My predecessor, Alfred Frazer, was also a very distinguished scholar, and carried out very important research at Samothrace, an island in the north of the Aegean. We have many photographs, many old lantern slides by Dinsmoor, which are an incredible visual archive related to the Parthenon, and which we are now saving by digitizing all this material. I believe there is much interest on the part of Columbia in supporting this big enterprise.

When I came to Columbia, the class on Greek art used to attract twenty-five students, perhaps thirty, and this was the number when I started, but now the number is between sixty and seventy, and this is very telling about the feeling of new generations, that even though they come with a lot of prejudice, as soon as they realize that the narrative is not the traditional one, they are fascinated even more by the subject.

The problem, however, is that the narrative about Greek art is still very conservative, even more so in the United States, where Greek art is dying on many campuses. There are several major institutions where the position in Greek art is not filled by professors, even where it once had a distinguished tradition.

Now I think that we risk throwing out the baby with the bath water, but I still believe that Greek art is a very important baby, so we should throw out all the water that was associated with this baby, which was very bad, but we should preserve the baby.

THE AMERICAN SCHOOL IN ATHENS

Columbia along with William Bell Dinsmoor was an important agent in the development of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. We are now trying to recreate this connection with that institution, which is very important for all those who do research, not just in the United States but all over the world. If in Greece you want to work in a museum or at an archaeological site, the American School is a great intermediary between American institutions and the Greek government.

For this project, the American School of Classical Studies at Athens was very important because it was a critical connection in getting recognition and all the support, technical and moral, that we could get. On the other hand, also very important, much more important is the Greek government because the Greek government, the superintendent of the Acropolis, has been very supportive of this project, so they have allowed our crew from the Visual Media Center to shoot all these images, both on the Acropolis and in its museum. This is a remarkable demonstration of cultural and intellectual generosity.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE PARTHENON

The Parthenon has changed its face over the past few decades, and also several times over the ages. In classical antiquity the Parthenon was a temple of Athena, and this is the way we always have thought about it. However, in the Middle Ages it became a church of the Virgin Mary, something that people have tended to forget. Another little-known fact is that at the end of the fifteenth century, the Parthenon became a mosque and was actually used as such until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

After Greece became independent, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Parthenon became the symbol of the Greek nation and of its political independence. After 1974, when

democracy was restored in Greece, the Parthenon became not just the symbol of the Greek nation, but also the symbol of the restored democracy. So this building is all about the political and social identity of modern Greece.

THE CONTEMPORARY RESURRECTION OF THE PARTHENON

Even though we are used to thinking about the building in its original classical form, we have to remember that because of these changes in function and meaning, the temple has changed its face and shape several times. So in Christian times, when it was converted into a church, the whole orientation of the building was changed, from the east to the west. When the church was converted into a mosque, a minaret was added on the west side of the building. At the end of the seventeenth century, in 1687, the temple blew up because it was bombed by the Venetians during the war between Venice and the Turks. At the time, the Parthenon was used by the Turks as an arsenal. Gunpowder was kept in the cella, right in the middle of the building. The Venetians who put Athens under siege decided to shell the temple, and the temple exploded. At that time, the building was still one of the best-preserved temples of Classical antiquity.

Remarkably, ever since the 26th of September 1687, the day the Parthenon was bombed, there's been an effort to reconstruct the building, to put the pieces together in order to have a newly recomposed building. This was especially true at the beginning of the twentieth century, precisely because the Parthenon had become the sacred icon of the Greek nation. There were systematic efforts to reconstruct part of the building by a very famous architect and engineer, Nicolas Balanos.

At the time the Parthenon stood in two parts, one on the east front, the other on the west front. The middle was almost completely missing. Balanos reconstructed a considerable part of the north colonnade, which is the part of the temple that you see when you first enter the Acropolis. His intention was both to secure the building, and also to enhance its visual impact, and to give a more coherent picture of the building which at the time was split in two pieces.

He used all the original materials restored to their original positions but also added new materials. One terrible decision he made, however, was to use iron beams to connect the marble pieces of the temple. When iron oxidizes it expands, so the result is that twenty years after Balanos' iron insertions, all the restored part began to explode.

The work on the Parthenon after Balanos has been mainly concerned with solving all the problems that Balanos himself had created. The main reason for the current campaign in Athens to restore the Parthenon is precisely an effort to revise the restorations by Balanos. The new campaign started in 1975, one year after the restoration of democracy in Greece, so the ideological meaning of this is very clear.

The new efforts operate more or less at two levels, one is to secure the building, while the other is to enhance the Parthenon's visibility. So more or less it's the same rationale that was behind Balanos' enterprise. The difference is that there is the effort to not use iron clamps, and to do something that is not going to disfigure the building, that is reversible, that is, to do something that is more tolerable for the building.

Almost every day there's a new bit of marble that is added or subtracted from the building. And this is the reason why, if you put photographs of the Parthenon in a chronological sequence, you see the temple constantly changing face. So the result is that there was scaffolding on the temple for 16 years at the time of its construction, between 448 B.C. and 432 B.C., and now there has again been scaffolding on the temple for the past eighty years, more or less. This is very telling about the significance of the building for us today. We are literally reconstructing the Parthenon, and this is a way of restoring this building to modern culture.

Clemente Marconi is an assistant professor of art history and archaeology, and teaches Greek art and architecture, cultural history and art history.