Receptions of Greek and Roman Antiquity in East Asia

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The Reception of Parthenon Sculpture in Modern Japanese Art Studies

(Recreation in 3-D of the Olympian Gods of the Parthenon Frieze: A Practice Report)

Rui Nakamura

In this chapter* I explore the reception of Greek sculpture in contemporary Japanese art studies and demonstrate how we at Tokyo University of the Arts recreated the Olympian gods of the Parthenon frieze in three dimensions over the last several years.¹

Tokyo University of the Arts dates back to Tokyo Fine Arts School, founded in 1887. It is the oldest art school in Japan. In 1949 Tokyo Fine Arts School and Tokyo Music School formed Tokyo University of the Arts, which has played a major role in the development of arts in Japan. Students in fine arts become skilled in figure drawing, after a long training of so-called ‘cast drawing’ of Classical Greek and Roman sculpture. This training is essential, because the admission of students to Tokyo University of the Arts is strictly based on their figure drawing ability.

I present as an example a cast of the well-known ‘Hermes of Olympia,’ a sculpture of the late Classical period dating to the mid-fourth century BC, which some believe to be a copy of an original sculpture (see fig. 23.1a).² Figs. 23.1b and 23.1c present an example of a drawing done by one graduate student. The drawing was started with an outline, then given shadow and texture. It took about eighteen hours to complete. This traditional training is intended to develop the ability to capture form and to depict space. It was practiced in Europe until the end of the nineteenth century, and was introduced to Japan in

* I would like to thank Professor Almut-Barbara Renger of Freie Universitöt Berlin for the opportunity to present my research at the conference ‘Greek and Roman Culture in East Asia: Texts & Artifacts, Institutions & Practices,’ July 4–5, 2013. This project of reconstructing the gods of the Parthenon east frieze was made possible by the support of Professor Hideto Fuse of Tokyo University of the Arts, Professor Toshihiro Osada of University of Tsukuba, and members of the ‘Parthenon Project Japan,’ 2007–2009 and 2011–2014. The project is supported by funding from the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research, Monbukagakusho, Japan.

¹ Nakamura 2011.
the Meiji era. This training in France has been discussed by Albert Boime, and, according to his research, basic drawing instruction was offered at the atelier, the preparatory school of the École des Beaux-Arts, and instilled ‘in the pupil an unshakable confidence in his drawing ability, and enabled him to tackle the most complicated objects with ease.’ The transplantation of European art education by hired foreigners in Japan during the Meiji era has been actively discussed in the field of art history. This training has declined in importance in Europe, but it has remained an indispensable element of training in Japan to the present day (see fig. 23.2).

I now turn to the project of recreating the Olympian gods of the Parthenon frieze in three dimensions. These figures were created by graduate students in the Department of Artistic Anatomy at Tokyo University of the Arts. They were well trained in cast drawing. The project combines art history, art education (especially cast drawing), and art creation (see fig. 23.3). The project has also enabled me to pay close attention to ‘the point of view of the artists,’ a matter that has not been well examined in Parthenon studies. I cite the project as one example of how Greek sculpture is received in modern Japanese art studies.

2 Recreation of the Olympian Gods of the Parthenon Frieze in 3-D

2.1 Historical Background

The Parthenon was built in Athens at the peak of the Classical period from 447 to 432 BC, by the sculptor Pheidias and several studios of sculptors from all over Greece. It is well documented in Plutarch’s Life of Pericles. Three sections — pediment, metope, and frieze — are embellished with rich sculptural decoration. The frieze was carved on the wall of the inner temple on all four sides, about 160 meters. The depth of the carving is 6 cm, so it is low relief. It represents the procession of the festival of the goddess Athena, the Great Panathenaea, which was held every four years in Athens.

4 Sato 2013.
5 Kanai 2005 and 2012. I would also like to thank Mr. Takeo Sato, the vice president of Shonan Art School, the pre-college institution in Japan, for allowing me to attend the cast drawing class on August 23, 2013.
**Figure 23.1a**
The cast of the bust of the ‘Hermes of Olympia.’ © Rui Nakamura

**Figure 23.1b**
The Reception of Parthenon Sculpture

Figure 23.1c

Figure 23.2
The cast drawing class at Shonan Art School, the pre-college institution, August 23, 2013. Students are drawing the bust of the Borghese Ares. © Rui Nakamura
2.2 Composition of the Frieze

The procession on the frieze starts at the southwest corner of the temple and terminates at the center of the east frieze, where the climax of the festival, the so-called Peplos ceremony, the dedication of the costume for the goddess Athena, is depicted. Next to this dedication scene, twelve Olympian gods are represented, divided into two groups. The heads of both gods and humans are about the same height, indicating the size of gods, as well as giving unity to the composition.

Relief sculpture is midway between drawing and sculpture, between two dimensions and three. It poses the problem of how one depicts space under the constraint of two dimensions.

2.3 The space of the Gods and the Interpretation

How to understand and interpret the configuration of the twelve gods on the east frieze is an unsolved problem, one that has been considered since the end of nineteenth century. The gods have two roles here: attending the Peplos ceremony and receiving the procession. It is also the case that they are considered invisible. Paradoxically, they are both present and not present; they are both here and on Mt. Olympus. They are essentially symbolic, and there are strongly held opinions that it is not unproblematic to consider the space they occupy on the Parthenon frieze.

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In 1999, Neils proposed that the configuration of the gods could be a semi-circle, and she reconstructed it using computer graphics. She depicted the gods as if they were viewing a drama at an ancient theater, only here they are viewing the Peplos ceremony. This reconstruction became very popular and is often cited and shown at scholarly meetings. This idea of a semi-circle was actually first proposed by A.H. Smith at the British Museum, and his drawing was published at the beginning of the twentieth century. Neils’s reconstruction has updated this idea using new technology.

2.4 Recreation: First Model and Second Model

I am interested in the central scene of the east frieze and the surrounding gods, and I raised the issue in my class in the Department of Artistic Anatomy at Tokyo University of the Arts. One graduate student in the class suggested creating a model for the scene. So in February 2009 we decided to work on the three-dimensional model. We did not use a 3-D scanner, or any other technology; we used only our own eyes and hands.

We have two types of models: the first model was made with industrial clay, from February 2009 to March 2010. When the exhibition at the British Museum was formalized in February 2012, we added some details to the first model and made a second model with urethane resin. The second model may be seen in fig. 23.4.

9 Neils 1999: 13, fig. 13.
10 Smith 1910: 50, fig. 96.
2.5 Hera and Zeus, and Four Gods

Why do we try to analyze the space the gods occupy on the mid-fifth-century Parthenon frieze? Because there was an important advance in the representation of space around the 440s and 430s BC. I take the figures of Hera and Zeus as examples. The head of Zeus, on the right, is viewed from the side (profile), the torso is a three-quarters view, and the legs are viewed from the side again. Thus, the frieze presents a combination of side view and three-quarters view. For Hera, on the other hand, her head is in three-quarters, her torso almost frontal, and her legs from the side, thus combining three types of view.

This type of three-quarters view first appeared in Greek art around 520–500 BC, when a group of artists called ‘Pioneers’ were active.11 Before that, for example, in the well-known archaic relief, the gods of the east frieze of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi, made around 525 BC, do not have a three-quarters view but only a side view, a frontal view, or a back view.12 The space represented for gods on the Parthenon frieze has a depth in which gods can be seen to move, think, and react.

The stool Hera sits on is not parallel to the throne of Zeus, but, taking into consideration the thickness of the body, we can suppose a certain depth of space. Given this recognition of body and space, we created the images of Hera and Zeus. The faces are modeled on some related works: the head of Hera on

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12 Stewart 1990: 102.
the Classical style of the Roman period (AD 30–180, from Agrigento, Sicily),\(^\text{13}\) and the head of Zeus on the ‘Zeus of Artemision,’ in the Classical period.\(^\text{14}\)

I also take up four gods next to Hera; they are Hermes, Dionysus, Demeter, and Ares. All of these gods, except Ares, are in physical contact. Ares is minimally isolated, but he overlaps with Hera, so he can be considered as closer to the viewer (see fig. 23.5a). Fig. 23.5b shows the speculative view from above. Jenkins and others at the British Museum have published a unique book of the Parthenon Frieze, *Second Sight of the Parthenon Frieze*, for sighted and visually impaired people.

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\(^{13}\) Jenkins et al. 2009: 12.

impaired people. It is unique because the depth of the space and overlapping of figures are indicated in a tactile relief form, and one can ‘see’ the Parthenon frieze with one’s fingers. The space is represented with a bird’s eye view of the figures. If we see the section of the four gods (Hermes to Ares) in the simplified signs (see fig. 23.5c), these gods are, indeed, placed within the depth of space.15

2.6 Study of the Anatomical Structure

In considering the space the gods occupy, the study of individual bodies is crucial. Take a look at the anatomical structure of Demeter. Anatomical studies of ancient art were not unusual in the nineteenth century. At the French art school, the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, the anatomical study of ancient art was quite popular.16 Fig. 23.6a is a line drawing of Demeter on the frieze by a Japanese art student. The head of the goddess has been destroyed, but we can assume that it was in three-quarter view, that her torso was also in three-quarter view, and her legs in side view, but the right thigh is seen from above. If we kept her outline and removed her costume, she would have a very compressed

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16 Comar 2009: 86.
Figure 23.6b
Demeter nude.

Figure 23.6c
The skeletal structure of Demeter.
Note. 6a-c, drawings: Kota Kato. © Rui Nakamura
torso and rather long legs (see fig. 23.6b). And if we speculated about the skeletal structure of Demeter, her left pelvis would be in side view, and her right pelvis would be seen from above; we can see how an adjustment is achieved around the pelvis (see fig. 23.6c). In this way, we adopted the nineteenth-century style of studying the composition of the body in Greek and Roman sculpture and incorporated that into the three-dimensional model.

2.7  ‘Parthenon Now’

In March 2010, we presented our reconstruction at the international symposium at the University of Tsukuba. The following year, in July 2011, an exhibition, ‘The Body Beautiful in Ancient Greece,’ which featured treasures from the British Museum’s Greek and Roman collection, was held in Tokyo. We had an opportunity to show our reconstruction to Dr. Jenkins, the curator of Greek and Roman art at the British Museum, who came to the exhibition. We then agreed to display the reconstructed figures at the ‘Parthenon Now’ exhibit at the British Museum in November 2012. The display remained there for about six months, until May 2013, and this 3-D reconstruction was officially accepted as an art resource at the British Museum. In Tokyo and other cities, we have been organizing a traveling exhibit of ‘Parthenon Now’ at the art galleries of universities (including the exhibit ‘Greek Sculpture Today: Plaster Casts, Facsimiles, and Recreation’ at Niigata University in 2015). We made models available to the audience, and the figures are now used by scholars in philosophy and art history as a tool for art appreciation and art education in college.

3  Conclusion

As I mentioned at the beginning, this project of recreating the twelve gods of the Parthenon frieze is based on a long tradition of cast drawing of Classical sculpture. It is at the junction of art history, art education, and art creation.

The reception of Classical art through cast drawing in Japan, however, has many problems. The old craft of plaster casts has not changed since the Meiji era, and in art education we still follow the nineteenth-century approach to Greek art, even though we have the benefit of spectacular archaeological finds in the twentieth century (for example, the Riace bronzes). Yet, the high quality of Classical sculpture has drawn students into the recreation of the gods on the Parthenon frieze. I hope that this project will enrich art history, art education, and art creation, and that it will enable new possibilities in Parthenon studies and contribute to a fresh reception of Greek and Roman culture.
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