

## The New Acropolis Museum: Where the Visual Feast Trumps Education

**T**he glittering new Acropolis Museum opened on June 20, 2009, amidst a flurry of international attention and press coverage. The need for a new museum was already apparent in the 1970s, but it took the intervening thirty years to become a reality. The new structure, designed by New York's Bernard Tschumi and curated by Dimitrios Pandermalis, replaces a predecessor that first opened its doors in 1874 and welcomed travelers, families, and archaeological superstars for more than a hundred years.

The new incarnation is a far cry from its dark and crowded ancestor. Located to the south of the Acropolis on Dionysiou Areopagitou, it rests on huge pylons above a recently excavated portion of the ancient city. Visitors, after passing through a TSA-worthy security apparatus, move up a wide ramp lined with artifacts from the Acropolis's slopes. The second floor is shaped like a colonnaded temple and contains the Archaic sculpture room, several displays that highlight the Periklean building program, and glowing niches set into the walls for smaller finds. The space is organized both thematically and chronologically, beginning in the Bronze Age and ending with a gleaming display of seventh-century C.E. gold coins. The escalators, placed within the central "cella," glide up to the top floor, where one can walk among the Parthenon marbles while enjoying a spectacular view. The museum has two gift shops, a well-priced café, and a balcony whose bold lunge



The Erechtheion's caryatids on display, now visible from all angles. Courtesy of the Acropolis Museum.



The Parthenon Gallery interacts with the Athenian Acropolis. Courtesy of Bernard Tschumi Architects.

toward the Acropolis provides an undisturbed view of both the Parthenon and the meticulously coiffed olive grove included in the museum's grounds.

Most striking about the artifacts on display are their sheer number: about four thousand, too many to have ever graced the older and much smaller museum. New visitors will be enthralled by the veritable forest of Archaic sculptures. Any questions can be answered by the discreetly hovering docents, employed specifically to wander the museum and engage people in conversation. Those not troubled by vertigo will be thrilled to walk on glass floors above the newly excavated remains of the Late Antique city; walkways are planned that will allow guests to climb down among the ancient streets. Those long familiar with the previous Acropolis Museum will see well-known, old friends—the Kritios Boy, the Bluebeard Pediment, the Rampin Rider—but will also be delighted by the newer additions: the Seated Scribes, the painted votive plaques, the hordes of wedding vessels (*loutrophoroi*). Expect to be pleasantly surprised by details not normally visible in a display of this sort, such as the chisel marks on the back of the Parthenon's frieze blocks or the elaborate and lush braids trailing past the shoulders of the Caryatids. Especially charming is the Hellenistic foundation pyre that greets visitors upon entering; in a modern foundation rite, a last pot was interred in the pyre and the deposit symbolically sealed in the glass floor during the televised opening ceremony.

The objects themselves are gorgeously illuminated by the natural light. The purified "low iron" glass used to make up the walls eliminates the hot summer's glare and adds instead a soft, silvery texture to the light. Thanks to the spacious 150,000 square feet, the sculptures and architectural fragments stand away from walls and corners and can be minutely examined from all angles. Other artifacts, such as metal attachments, votive terracottas, and pottery, are displayed in recessed cases in the east and west walls; the handful of free-standing cases are small and serve as accents to display one or two particular artifacts.

As a whole, the building is a spectacular example of a site-specific museum. The dialogue between the museum and the adjacent Acropolis is at once subtle and unmistakable, already evident as one takes in the exterior of the building. Towering above visitors, its size and shape are akin to the huge limestone outcrop that it celebrates. The wide ramp in the interior, lined with artifacts from the slopes, recalls the entrance ramp that once led supplicants upward to the sanctuary; present-day crowds make the pilgrimage much like the ancient Athenians. In the Archaic sculpture room, the white luster of marble contrasts with the slate grey of the concrete piers and walls, recalling the interaction of the white Pentelic marble and grey Eleusinian limestone on the Acropolis, so beloved of architecture aficionados.

The topmost floor, aligned at an off-kilter angle that directly mirrors the neighboring Parthenon, is a breath-taking achievement. A magnificent, panoramic vista greets the visitor upon exiting the central "cella." The concrete buildings of the modern city stretch to the south, while to the north the green hills of Lykabittos, Philopappos, and the Acropolis stand close enough to touch, as if artfully arranged by long-ago geological forces for our viewing pleasure. The sight is so impressive that one has to wrench one's gaze back toward the display, to what many consider the entire ideological underpinning of the museum: the Parthenon Marbles (Elgin Marbles), both the originals that remained in Athens and the casts of those still in the British Museum. The room's form abstractly replicates the sculptured façade of the Parthenon, making it possible to wander along the temple's faux colonnade, looking in toward the famed marble figures. With their original, fifth-century B.C.E. resting place visible beyond the glass walls, the sculptures of the frieze, the metopes and the pediments have been arranged around the central cella and hung at several heights and planes, creating a segmented surface through which the visitor can walk. This spatial partitioning encourages viewers to zigzag in and out of the Parthenon's external layers in a way

never before possible. The design has, in fact, created an entirely new way to experience the temple; it adds a distinct, schematic, and original labyrinth that visitors can explore mere minutes after gazing at, photographing, but never entering, the temple on the Acropolis itself.

The casts of the missing pedimental sculptures, the center of so much media attention, stand at either end of the Parthenon Gallery, facing east and west, as they did in antiquity; now, however, the modern viewer stands practically nose to nose with the classical Greek gods of the pediments. One could not imagine a more remarkable and intimate way to see and experience the Parthenon Marbles, a point made abundantly clear in the international media blitz surrounding the museum's opening.

Particularly characteristic of the Parthenon Gallery, and the museum at large, is the extensive use of glass, which floods the interior with natural light. As anyone who visits will notice, there is a particular character to the light that beats down on the Acropolis, something that the museum's architect has exploited to great effect. Glass is everywhere. Not only are the walls composed of it, but so also are sections of the floor and ceiling. With its three levels and a basement housing an excavation, the glass building becomes a symbolic manifestation of an archaeological site, a three-dimensional embodiment of stratigraphy. Looking down is a reminder of the many ancient strata that lie beneath the modern city streets. Looking up, one sees a living palimpsest with the surreal scampering of children on the floor above. Of course, as eye-popping as the effect may be, the designers were clearly not women wearing skirts on a hot Athenian day. Visitors are strongly advised to dress accordingly!

Perhaps because of its modern sensibilities, the

museum's design seems to celebrate the nineteenth-century view of ancient Greece, highlighting rationality and simplicity. The lines are clean and the forms basic. Even the muted color palette serves to create a mood reflecting the idealized classical Acropolis—no gaudy ancient color-clashing or Byzantine ochres here. Instead, the shades are cool: the hard grey of limestone, the dusky blue of the afternoon sky, the cream-colored marble of the temples. Yet, for some, the color palette, combined with the museum's concrete, metal, and glass, might have a cold and sterile feel; the architectonic lines, the industrial girders, the metallic lining of the artifact cases—these may more readily bring to mind the skeletal cranes and hardware of the Parthenon's reconstruction project than any classical past.

While the aesthetic experience is stunning, it seems to have dictated and controlled the role of pedagogy in the museum's design. The press pamphlet mentions that “Signage has been developed

to be both visible and yet to be as discrete as possible, recognizing that signage and wayfinding must not compete with the artifacts” (*Acropolis Museum Media Kit*, 2009, 4). The signs and labels are easy to miss, because they fade into the background and bear only regular, black text. The lack of photographs, illustrated reconstructions, and other drawings is conspicuous, especially given the rich photographic tradition available from the excavations, as well as the hundreds of drawings and paintings showing the later life of the Acropolis. There are very few maps to aid orientation, although three charming and delicate models of the Acropolis are a pleasure to see; one can only wish that they had been larger, so as to compete with the more massive, beautifully



The Archaic Gallery on the second floor of the Acropolis Museum. Courtesy of the Acropolis Museum.

articulated, and gleaming-white models of the fifth-century Periklean buildings. The information provided by the signs is generally too vague and elementary, lacking in detail and with little attention given to chronology or disagreements in interpretation. For example, the function and contents of the Periklean buildings are ignored in favor of their architectural and sculptural details—there is no discussion of the altars beneath the Nike Temple, no mention of the scholarly kerfuffle over whether the Parthenon was a temple, and no exhibit dedicated to the cult statues, not even that most famous product of Phidias, the Athena Parthenos. Fortunately, the objects from the sanctuaries on the slopes highlight daily life and the social function of the slope sanctuaries. These displays are especially strong on ancient marriage customs, gender roles, and the domestic experience. The slim discussion of ancient ritual, however, notably the Panathenaic procession, the sacrifices to Athena, and the various altars and cult statues on the Acropolis, is cause for disappointment. In short, the museum's approach to signage reflects a larger philosophy evident throughout: the artifacts are central, while historical and archaeological contexts pass to the wayside.

Melina Mercouri's campaign to retrieve the Parthenon Marbles, begun in 1983, continues in the Parthenon Gallery, where dull white plaster casts stand in place of the missing sculptures. Yet the sculptures removed by Elgin are not the only glaring omission from the Museum; one likely to receive more attention as time passes is the absence of entire periods of history. The displays officially cover the Mycenaean through Roman periods, although the emphasis of the collection and its educational literature rests on the Archaic and Classical periods, a fact, one might argue, that was dictated more by the interests of the nineteenth-century excavators than by anything else. Still, even the geological history of the limestone outcrop and its position in the topography of the Mesogeion plain is not explored, so that the Acropolis is presented as having no connection at all to its wider landscape (a trend continued by the failure to connect the Acropolis's history in any way to the Agora or other parts of the ancient city). The Roman period is very



The entrance to the Acropolis Museum includes a view of the recent excavations. Courtesy of Bernard Tschumi Architects.

poorly represented, both in objects and labeling, so that visitors will have no idea that a temple to Roma and Augustus stood among the Classical structures or that Herodes Atticus once built a theater there in honor of his murdered wife. A beautifully filmed short video on the top floor is the only concession to the post-Roman Acropolis; computerized reconstructions give a delightful but extremely brief synopsis of the Parthenon's history up until Elgin's departure. Unfortunately, the video is too short to address the later history of the building in any depth, and it does not address the rest of the Acropolis. Most interested visitors will never know that the Parthenon became a sacred site for the Byzantine worship of the Theotokos (Mother of God); that in the medieval period the Acropolis was a fortified site, with a last remaining tower still standing to this day; that a mosque and minaret stood there in the midst of an Ottoman-era town; or that the Acropolis became a symbol of resistance during the Nazi occupation. The entire account of the archaeological excavation is summed up in one sentence. Ultimately, the museum's presentation of the history of the Acropolis effectively terminates

with the Roman period, all but ignoring its subsequent life.

The museum's architecture, though it has its detractors, mirrors and reinterprets the limestone rock and its buildings in an enthralling and constantly surprising way. Moving through the building and among its artifacts is an encounter that is to be highly recommended. That experience, however, subsumed the didactic function of the museum. Those interested in exploring the archaeological history of the Acropolis, rather than just its art, will likely be disappointed. In the end, as an aesthetic experience, the new Acropolis Museum is a resounding triumph, but as a place to learn about the long, complex, and fascinating history of Athens's most important cultural landmark, it is a missed opportunity.

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