

An Artifact Speaks • Artifact Information Sheet

Artifact Name: Statue of Athena (Athena Parthenos)

Time Period of the Original: Completed 438 BCE

Culture/Religion Group: Classical Greek

Material of the Original: Gold, Ivory, Wood

Reproduction? Yes



Background Information:

Housed inside the Parthenon temple in Athens was an enormous statue of Athena, the city-state's patron deity and the goddess of wisdom, handicrafts, and warfare. The statue is attributed to Phidias (flourished c. 490–430 BCE), the temple's artistic director. Measuring approximately 40 feet in height, this work was chryselephantine: gold and ivory hung on a wooden structure.

Though the statue itself no longer exists, ancient models (on which this small replica was based) and descriptive texts give us an idea of its original appearance. Here is how it was described by the geographer Pausanias in the 2nd century CE:

The statue itself is made of ivory and gold. In the middle of her helmet is placed an image of the Sphinx . . . and on either side of it are griffins in relief. . . . The statue of Athena stands upright, dressed in a full-length chiton, and on her breast a head of Medusa is represented in ivory. She carries a statue of Nike [goddess of victory] about 4 cubits [6 feet] high, and a spear in the other hand; a shield is placed by her feet, and near the shield is a serpent. This serpent would be Erichonios [mythological Greek king]. On the base of the image is represented the Birth of Pandora in relief. Description of Greece, Book I, Attica.

Note that this replica has replaced the Birth of Pandora relief with the name of the goddess and does not have Athena holding a spear.

Worshippers were not invited into ancient Greek temples, for they were considered the houses of the gods. Prayers, animal sacrifices, and the giving of gifts would be done outside the building. The faithful would be able to see the statues inside through the opening in the front.

Did You Know?

Nike, whose name means "I am victorious," was the inspiration for the name of the Nike shoe company. The Nike "swoosh" represents the goddess's wing.

(continued)

Sources on the Statue of Athena:

- “Chryselephantine Statue of Athena.” *Chryselephantine Statue of Athena*. 1 Jan. 2015. Web. 21 Mar. 2015. <http://ancient-greece.org/art/athena-statue.html>.
- “The Colossal Athena Parthenos Statues of Pheidias.” *The Colossal Athena Parthenos Statues of Pheidias*. Web. 21 Mar. 2015.
- “Phidias”. Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015. Web. 20 Mar. 2015. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/455782/Phidias>.

Date Notes:

BCE (Before Current Era) = B.C.

CE (Current Era) = A.D.