

The Parthenon in Danish art and architecture, from Nicolai Abildgaard to Theophil Hansen¹

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Until the final decades of the 18th century the Parthenon was virtually unknown to the world. What the temple looked like, where it was situated and how it related to its surroundings – all this, despite the widespread admiration for everything Classical, was shrouded in almost total mystery. If I may generalize, before 1800 the concept of ‘antiquity’ was almost wholly defined by Rome: Roman art, architecture and literature. Of course, by the mid-18th century this was beginning to be challenged, thus for instance inducing Piranesi to defend the primacy of Roman as opposed to Greek architecture. As for the Parthenon, its fame and iconic status was however still eclipsed by that of the Roman Pantheon.

All this changed in the decades around 1800 – no doubt faster in the Protestant North than in the Latin South, but the trend was pan-European. A process now set in motion meant that Greece and all things Greek gradually came to replace Rome as the privileged centre of artistic and scholarly focus: not at any measurable speed, and not in the sense that Rome lost out completely, but within the Classical hierarchy a remarkable and long-lasting shift took place.²

With a few examples below I shall illustrate how this adulation of the Parthenon (I can find no better word) affected the Danish art and architecture of Theophil Hansen’s youth, and then look at the way this early adu-

lation still influenced his late and, perhaps luckily, perhaps sadly, unfinished project for an Acropolis Museum in the final years of his life.

One of the first Danes to show clear artistic awareness of the Parthenon’s Doric glory was the learned painter-philosopher Nicolai Abildgaard (1743-1809). The closest Abildgaard ever got to Greece was Paestum in the south of Italy (these were also the only Greek temples that the father of Classical archaeology, Johann Winckelmann, ever saw), but when in 1801 he embarked upon illustrating the Greek style comedy *Andria*, *The Girl from Andros* by the Roman playwright Terence (Terentius), he approached the task of creating an Athenian setting in a deliberately playful and capricious manner. He mixes Neoclassical buildings from Copenhagen and from a Utopian Athens to create a setting that in its emphasis on dazzling perspective has clear allusions to the ancient *scenographia*, as famously described by the Roman architect Vitruvius. In its second painting the series has a fantasy setting of the Tower of Winds (based upon the engraving in his edition of Stuart & Revett’s *The antiquities of Athens*) – and in the comedy’s paradigmatic opening scene a version of the Parthenon is the dazzling *point de vue* of a street scene in a fantasy Athens (Fig. 1).³

The next decade saw the transition from fantasy to actual familiarity, a move resulting in a greatly increased

1 This is the text of a lecture given at a conference in January 2015 on ‘Theophil Hansen and Athens’, organized by the Danish Institute at Athens in connection with the Theophil Hansen exhibition at the B. & M. Theocharakis Foundation in Athens. The verbal style of the lecture has been retained and only the essential references added. I am indebted to Director Rune Frederiksen for effective planning, the creation of much fruitful dialogue and splendid hospitality.

2 Atherton 2006 is an illuminating case-study illustrating how Greece replaced Rome as the valued centre of attention; a similar process changed attitudes to Greek tragedy: Kragelund 2015, ch. 17.

3 On the *Andria* series, see Kragelund 1987, 137-85; Lederballe 2009, 139-49 (both with bibliography).



Fig. 1. N. Abildgaard, *Scene from Terence's Andria, Act I, Scene 1*. Oil on canvas. 157.5 x 142 cm. Signed "N. Abildgaard 1803" (National Gallery of Denmark).

Danish awareness of the real Parthenon.⁴ In 1813, the first Classical scholars from Denmark visited and brought home knowledge; in 1818-20 followed the architect and later Royal Academy professor Jørgen Hansen Koch (1787-1860), whose drawings from Mycenae, Aegina and Athens would have given his Copenhagen Academy students a clearer idea about Greek architecture. So would the hundreds of drawings by himself and his colleagues, drawings that still form the core of the Greek collection in the Danish National Art Library (Fig. 2).⁵ This was also the time when the Academy became able to give its students a more immediate impression of Greek art through the acquisition of casts from the so-called Elgin Marbles. Casts of the Phidias frieze, the metopes and the pediment figures were between 1819 and 1828 included

among the canonical works exhibited in the Academy's cast collection at Charlottenborg Palace in Copenhagen. Within a decade, such time-honoured icons as the *Laocoon* and the *Apollo Belvedere* were now joined by such up-pity newcomers as the *Ilissus*, the Parthenon metopes and the Phidias frieze (Fig. 3).⁶ In the history of taste, this was a rapid shift of unprecedented magnitude. What added to the excitement was the sensational discovery that two fragments of Greek sculpture that had been in the Royal collections since 1688 were in fact fragments of one of the Parthenon metopes.⁷ In these years the Parthenon and the Acropolis entered public consciousness as the very summit of artistic endeavour. What Theophil Hansen saw when drawing in the Academy's cast collection was, in short, an expression of the growing admiration for all

⁴ Dietz 2000 offers a panoramic survey of Dano-Greek interaction.

⁵ Catalogues and discussions of the Greek material in the Danish National Art Library: Bendtsen 1993; Haugsted 1996.

⁶ Zahle 2008, 214-37.

⁷ Lund & Rathje 1991, 11-56.



Fig. 2. Christian Hansen, *The temple of Erechtheum*. Oil on canvas. 35.5 x 54.2 cm. 1844. Private collection (photo: Danish National Art Library).

things Greek – the country of which, in letters from his brother Christian, he was hearing so much.⁸

In Denmark this adulation of all things Greek and widespread sympathy for the country's battle for liberty were combined with a no less fervent admiration for the nation's top cultural hero, the sculptor Bertel (or, in Italian, Alberto) Thorvaldsen (1770-1844), an artist whom Hansen throughout his life held in the highest esteem. In the cast collection of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts the tondi of the so-called 'Modern Phidias' (i.e. Thorvaldsen) would, with almost demonstrative insistence, share the space otherwise allotted to the casts of the Phidias frieze and a relief symbolically evoking the Roman Empire (Fig. 4). This is a programmatic layout strongly indicative of a specific neo-classical aesthetics that would follow Theophil Hansen throughout his life.

As observed by Villads Villadsen, in the essay re-printed in the splendid catalogue of the exhibition in Athens,⁹ there is something almost symbolic in the fact that 1838, the year of Thorvaldsen's final, triumphant homecoming to Copenhagen from Rome, was also the year of Hansen's departure for Greece. Where Rome had been the arena of Thorvaldsen's rise to international fame, Athens would now become the central, permanent centre of Theophil Hansen's aesthetic project.¹⁰

As for Thorvaldsen, the homecoming sculptor hero was celebrated in Copenhagen and his work honoured by the decision to build him a museum. It was built with money donated by the general public, high and low, and by the city of Copenhagen – whereas the role of the monarch was deliberately, not to say provocatively, underplayed. We are close to the year of a European revolution, 1848.

8 Villadsen 2014, 222.

9 Cassimatis & Panetsos 2014.

10 Villadsen 2014, 222-31.



Fig. 3. Kristen Købke, *From the Cast Collection at the Royal Academy in Charlottenborg*. Oil on canvas. 41.5 x 36 cm. 1830 (*The Hirschsprung Collection*).



Fig. 4. P.H. Rasmussen, *The Cast Collection in the Danish Royal Academy*. Oil on canvas. 47 x 44 cm. 1837. Private collection (here reproduced from Bundgaard Rasmussen et al. 2008, 234).

The profound ties between this project and the period's admiration for the Parthenon have often gone unnoticed. But here I will first present the basics of this relationship. Gottlieb Bindesbøll (1800-56), the architect put in charge of building the museum, had himself been profoundly inspired by what he had seen during his long stay in Greece in 1835-6. Here he had become acquainted, partly through the help of his friend and colleague Christian Hansen, the older brother of Theophil, with a hitherto unknown aspect of ancient architecture: polychromy.¹¹ This was far from Thorvaldsen, and far from the till then obligatory colourless Danish Neo-Palladianism as it was practised in Denmark by C. F. Hansen (1756-1845) and in Germany by Schinkel. Bindesbøll shared Theophil Hansen's admiration for Schinkel, whose Museum in Berlin he first planned to imitate in his Museum for Thorvaldsen – but what Bindesbøll also shared with Hansen was the wish to use colour as part of the architectural vocab-

ulary, thereby of course creating a spectacular framework setting for all the Thorvaldsen casts and marbles. “More Bindesbøll's Museum than mine”, the old Thorvaldsen is said to have jokingly observed (Fig. 5).¹²

Rather than a Schinkel-inspired model for the museum with an internal Pantheon dome, Bindesbøll eventually opted for a massively compact format that variously underlines the sacral nature of the complex. What sustains these temple associations are the monumental scale and elevation, as well as the tomb-like gateways, each formed on an A and T modular so as to mimic Alberto (as he was called in Italy) Thorvaldsen's signature. Add to this the strong axiality that moves from the central front gateway all through the complex, en route passing over the place where Thorvaldsen was to be buried, finally to reach a kind of apsis, from where the model for the sculptor's iconic *Christ* seems to be blessing the tomb of the hero.¹³

11 Bindesbøll's pioneering use of external polychromy: Van Zanten 1977, 150-67.

12 Bruun & Fenger 1892, 104.

13 On Bindesbøll and his Museum, see Bruun & Fenger 1892, Bramsen 1959, 49-97; Millech 1960; Thule Kristensen 2013, 58-148.



Fig. 5. G. Binesbøll, drawing for the façade of Thorvaldsen's Museum. Pencil and watercolour on paper. 61.7 x 97.1 cm. C. 1842 (Danish National Art Library).



Fig. 6. The Frieze of Jørgen Sonne, with workers carrying Thorvaldsen's sculptures into his Museum. The fresco was completed in 1848. On the basis of the original drawings it was completely renewed in 1948-50 by the painter Axel Salto (here reproduced from Thule Kristensen 2013).

The architectural framework is, in short, richly associative. What matters in the present context is that Binesbøll also inserted clear references to the Parthenon in the decorative fabric of his museum. This, indeed, is a fact that has mainly gone unnoticed. But knowing the Parthenon, there can be little doubt that the chariots of Helios and Selene adorning the corner capitals of the museum's façade mirror the similar corner positions of Helios and Selene's chariots in the Parthenon's east pediment. One may add to this the clear references to the Parthenon frieze. The Thorvaldsen Museum is surrounded on its three sides by a frescoed frieze painted by Jørgen Sonne (1801-90) after the plan of Binesbøll. In two separate movements this frieze on the one side shows the enthusiastic, unofficial regatta sailing forward to welcome Thorvaldsen back to Denmark, while the other procession shows workers carrying his sculptures from the ship into the museum (Fig. 6). The colouring and drawing deliberately mimic Greek vases, whereas the outlay, when seen from above, has a no doubt deliberate similarity to that of the likewise bifurcating Parthenon frieze (Fig. 7).¹⁴ How better to celebrate the so-called modern Phidias than with a similar

frieze celebrating how his gifts to the nation were carried into his temple?

After these examples of Danish Parthenon adulation, it is time to turn to Athens, to the project initiated in 1885, when the great finds of archaic sculpture on the Acropolis made it necessary to build a museum. Theophil Hansen was officially asked to produce the drawings. He was so proud of the project that in 1887, when he was awarded the so-called Nobel prize of architecture, the gold medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, he donated a complete set of photographs illustrating the project to the Royal Academy in Copenhagen.¹⁵ I published these photographs and the relevant drawings at the Vienna Symposium in 2013. Some of the drawings were shown in the exhibition in Athens.¹⁶

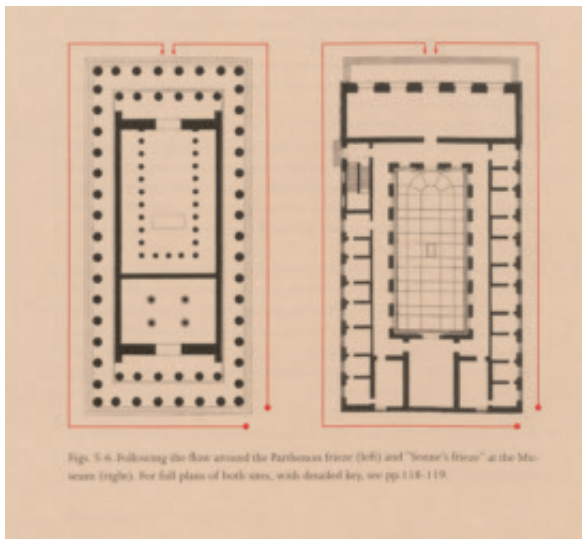
The most significant first-hand information about the project is contained in a speech by Hansen himself on the occasion of celebrating his fifty years in Athens – I edited the contemporary English translation of the speech in the above, and we now have a modern English version from Professor Marilena Cassimatis that is printed in the splendid Athens exhibition catalogue.¹⁷

¹⁴ Henderson 2005, 22 agrees that the similar layout of the friezes is significant.

¹⁵ There are brief references to the Acropolis Museum in Niemann & Feldegg 1893, 118, 127; Russack 1942, 145; Kokkou 1977, 239-41; Haugsted 1996, 343 (with thanks to Aristeia Christensen in Athens for sending a copy of Kokkou).

¹⁶ Kragelund 2013, 179-92; cf. Cassimatis & Panetsos 2014, 22-8 with cat. nos. 38.1-9.

¹⁷ Cassimatis & Panetsos 2014, 26-8.



Figs. 5-6. Following the floor around the Parthenon frieze (left) and "women's frieze" at the Museum (right). For full plans of both sites, with detailed key, see pp. 118-119.

Fig. 7. *Plan of the Parthenon and of Thorvaldsen's Museum with position of friezes (after Henderson 2005, 22).*



Fig. 8. *Theophil Hansen, Proposed setting for Acropolis Museum. Pen and ink on paper. 32.3 x 29.7 cm. 1887 (Vienna, Academy of Arts).*

However, to understand Hansen's plans it is crucial to study the surviving drawings which show that he at some point drastically changed the position of the museum. From an early stage in the project we have a ground plan, which shows the originally intended position in relation to the Acropolis. This was in relation to what later happened much more to the east, but in its core layout it is basically identical with the later project.¹⁸ In a later, more detailed version (Fig. 8), which further illustrates the museum's relation to the old Military Hospital (to the south of which Bernard Tschumi's New Acropolis Museum now stands), Hansen opted for a position slightly further to the west, but still with his modern stoa running parallel with the ruins of the Stoa of Eumenes that in Antiquity connected the theatres of Herodes Atticus and Dionysus.

I shall shortly return to what motivated this westward change of position and how it would affect the visitor's aesthetic experience, but first I should comment briefly on the ground plan. Hansen envisaged a large, open

complex divided in two by the present-day Dionysio Areopagitou Street (Fig. 9). At each of the complex's four corners Hansen placed Corinthian tholoi connected by stoa that are closed towards the street but open towards inner courtyards. Visitors would gain access to the museum through four Ionic temple gateways. To the south of this oblong complex, where the terrain slopes rather steeply downwards, Hansen unusually places a one-storey theatre-shaped complex that opens up to an inner courtyard.

Where Hansen's stoa are visual evocations of the stoa of antiquity, the theatre shape playfully seems to resume and echo the theatres dominating the south slope of the Acropolis, adding a modern parallel to the ancient icons. So does the tetra style Ionic entry temples, the nearby temple of Nike being the ultimate model. It adds to the feeling of authenticity that the project, unusually in Hansen's oeuvre, seemingly works without elevating ramps and staircases, the stoa, tholoi and temples placed flatly on ground level. However, as the views from the

¹⁸ The early plan: Kragelund 2013, fig. 1 = Cassimatis & Panetsos 2014, fig. 38.6.



Fig. 9. *Theophil Hansen, Museum für Athen. I. Perspektivische Ansicht. 25.5 x 58.5 cm. 1887. Photograph of an ink on paper drawing in the Hansen bequest in the Danish National Art Library. In the background can be seen Hansen's Zappeion and Gärtner's Royal Palace, now the Greek Parliament.*



Fig. 10. *Theophil Hansen, Museum für Athen. I. Rückwärtige Ansicht. 18 x 59 cm. 1887. Photograph of an ink on paper drawing in the Hansen bequest in the RIBA Library Drawings & Archives Collections, London.*

south rear illustrate, Hansen has used the natural slope of the area to introduce great visual variation, the sub-structures, which support the Museum's southbound rear façade, clearly echoing the Acropolis' raw cut walls of substruction supporting the platform of the Temple of Nike.

Seen directly from the south (Fig. 10), where Hansen intended to place a café for the visitors, the semi-circular colonnade enclosing the internal courtyard would serve as a sort of uniform pediment above which the individual segments of the complex would stand out clearly against

the green backdrop of the Acropolis. Here, from the south, with the low-slung, pavilion-style disposition of the museum's line of buildings, the layout of this complex would have been easily grasped; seen from here, moreover, an aspect that in Hansen's public oeuvre is almost unique seems to call for an explanation.

As outlined in the drawings, Hansen's project is markedly centrifugal, its central section so un-accentuated and un-emphasized that one looks in vain in his public oeuvre for a parallel. From the Athens Academy to the Vienna *Musikverein* and Vienna Parliament (Fig. 11), the disposi-



Fig. 11. Illustration from *Das K.K. Reichsraths-Gebäude in Wien von Theophil von Hansen, Vienna. 1890* (The Danish National Art Library).

tion is almost invariably the opposite, the side pavilions as it were framing, highlighting and elevating a more massive and highly ornate central section.¹⁹ So why the departure in this, his Athenian swan song?

It is the intended change of location for the entire complex which offers the key to solving this problem. As we have seen, in his second ground plan Hansen had decided to move the whole complex slightly to the west (Fig. 8). If one carefully examines this new location, it emerges that its overriding purpose was to provide the complex with its almost demonstratively missing centre. In this location, a person standing in the Museum's axis of symmetry would have had the dramatically protruding southwest corner of the Parthenon right at his centre of vision (in Athens, one can recapture the effect by looking up at the Acropolis when standing at the corner of the Dionysio Areopagitou



Fig. 12. *Theophil Hansen, Museum für Athen. I. Rückwärtige Ansicht. 18 x 59 cm. 1887.* Photograph of an ink on paper drawing in the Hansen bequest in the RIBA Library Drawings & Archives Collections, London with modern photo of Parthenon inserted to show Hansen's intended effect.

Street and the Parthenonos street, which is roughly where the Museum's central axis would have been). So this monumental and visually almost invasive corner was to have been the soaring *point de vue* of Hansen's whole complex, high above its very centre (Fig. 12).

In short, Hansen's project is centrifugal precisely because his modern-day buildings were meant to be seen as moving aside (humbly, as it were), providing at their centre an uncontested primary space for this venerable Doric set piece, the very icon of Classical architecture. It is clearly for this same reason that Hansen avoided using the Doric order in his exterior. Instead, he makes his project encircle and, as it were, inscribe the venerable ruin, first with flagpoles flying the national Greek flag and further out by buildings in the two other Classical orders, the Ionic and then finally the Corinthian.

Where Hansen's Ionic temples are firmly rooted in Athenian tradition, his Corinthian tholoi are, in the context, an unusually innovative element that allowed him to give his museum the kind of domed Pantheon rotunda so brilliantly introduced to museum architecture by the idol of his youth, Schinkel.²⁰ But where Schinkel in the *Altes Museum* imitates the Pantheon's Corinthian order, Hansen in the interior of his Athens museum pays homage to the genius loci by using the Doric. As for the Corinthian exterior of these tholoi, however, another icon of his youth may well be relevant: what are they but massively enlarged fantasy versions of the likewise Corinthian Ly-

¹⁹ Stalla 2014, 294-303 aptly describes Hansen's use of this modular system.

²⁰ Hansen and Schinkel: in his diary from 1838 (Villadsen 2014, 223) the *Altes Museum* is "without doubt the most beautiful Piece of Architecture I have seen". Hansen saw himself as Schinkel's pupil: Stalla 2014, 294.

sicrates monument that Hansen had drawn in his youth, and to which he would return again and again?²¹ Finally, as Professor Georgios Panetsos rightly made me aware, these tholoi resume and bring to full closure the monumental theatrical half circle of the building's south façade.

When entering the Acropolis through the gateway of Mnesikles' *Propylaea*, one sees the Parthenon at its most imposing, across a diagonal that at its centre has the temple's northwestern corner.²² It was no doubt Hansen's intention to replicate this effect, but now from the sunlit south and from below upwards, with his low and modern buildings respectfully laid out so that they would have provided a kind of architectural frame for this compelling visual experience. This *mise-en-scène* function of archi-

itecture is not un-paralleled in Hansen's oeuvre. As rightly observed by Professor Alexander Papageorgiou-Venetas, Hansen's Zappeion works on similar principles, since its open courtyard 'frames' a splendidly panoramic view of the Lykabettos Mountain. The Parthenon Museum's very similar interaction of setting and architecture adds significantly to the intrinsic value of Hansen's final project.

To conclude: Hansen owed his meteoric rise to architectural stardom to his years in Athens. The links with Sinas, who financed his Athens Observatory, proved crucial when he left for Vienna – and from there the rest is history. What I hope to have shown is that he did not arrive in Greece wholly unprepared. Indeed, in the Denmark of his youth there was much that was already Greek.

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²¹ Hansen produced a detailed reconstruction of the Lysicrates monument in 1846: Cassimatis & Panetsos 2014, fig. 8.1; with Stalla 2014, 295.

²² In Antiquity it was only when arriving at the Chalkotheke terrace closer to the Parthenon that one would have got the first full – but there, diagonal – view of the complex: Hurwit 2005, 12 (with bibliography).

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