The British Museum

wellcome

KING'S College LONDON

Access All Senses

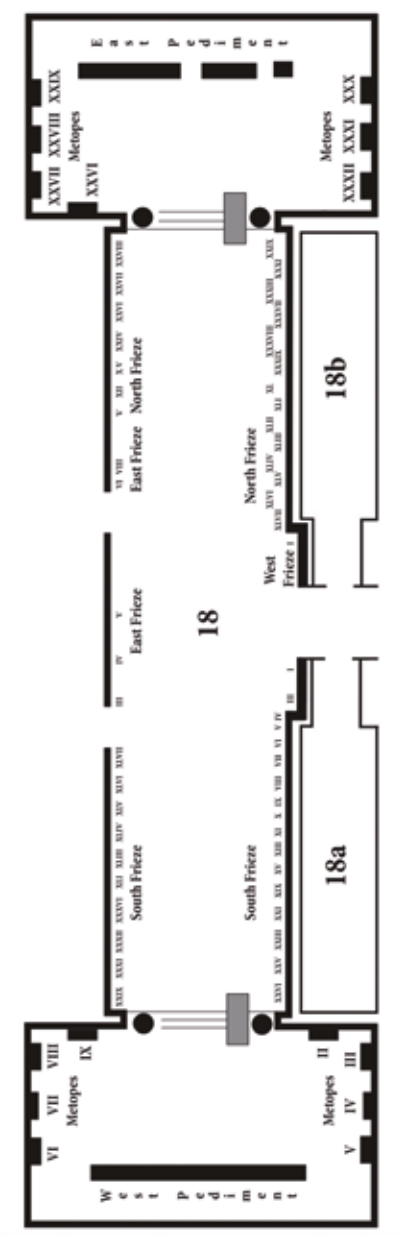
Experiencing the Parthenon through audio description, touch and British Sign Language

14 December 2018
15 March 2019
17.45–20.00

Event organiser:
Dr Ellen Adams
King's College London
ellen.adams@kcl.ac.uk

An event held in the Parthenon Galleries of the British Museum. You will find audio describers and Deaf art tour leaders (with BSL interpreters) in Rooms 18, 18a and 18b ready to demonstrate these modes of communication. Please drop by and enjoy a demonstration!'

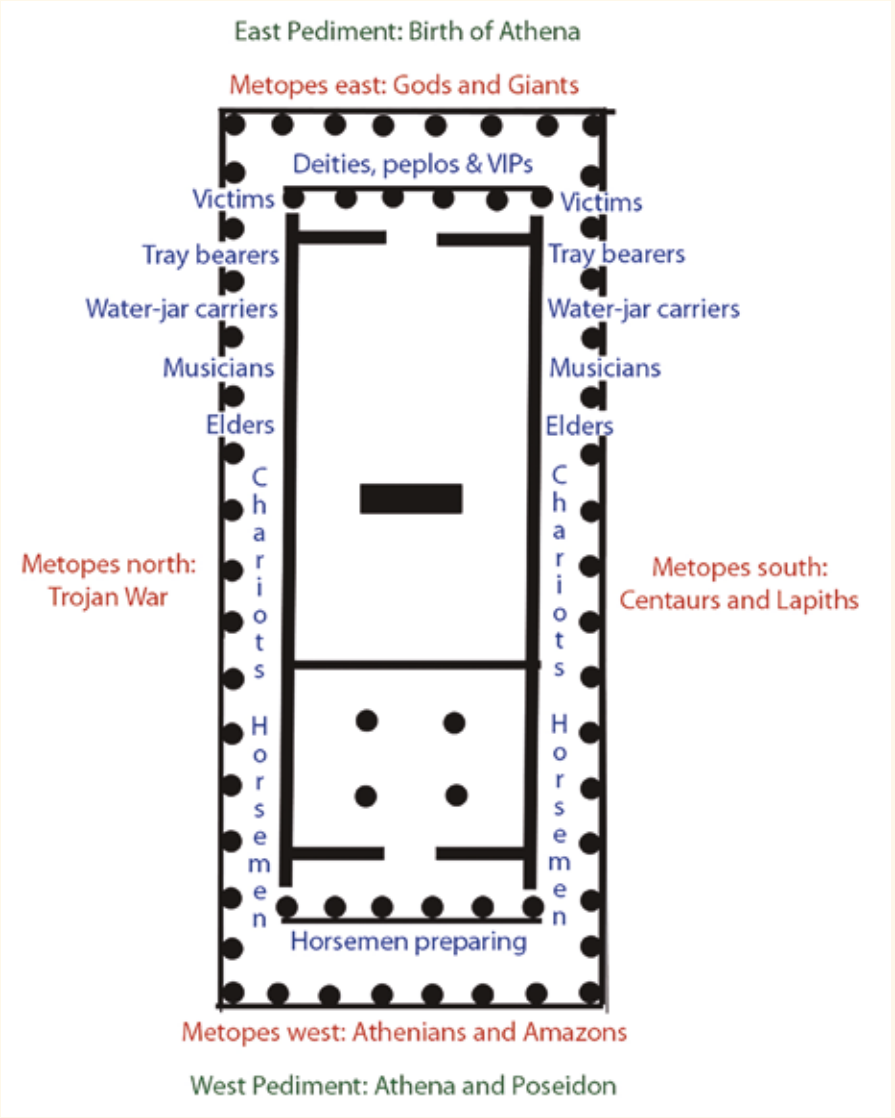
The Parthenon Galleries of the British Museum



Drawn by Ellen Adams

We may compare this layout with the original sculptural programme (see across).

The Parthenon's sculptural programme



Drawn by Ellen Adams (Blue: frieze; Green: pediments; Red: metopes)

The Parthenon was constructed in the fifth century BC on the Athenian Acropolis. One of the most impressive monuments from the ancient world, it possessed an elaborate and sophisticated sculptural programme, which celebrated Greek (or Athenian) greatness.

What is Audio Description (AD)?

AD provides access for blind or partially sighted (BPS) people, by using words to create vivid visions and sensory experiences in the mind. Most BPS people can see something – shapes, colours, or tunnel-vision. Spoken language can help make sense of this partial information. AD is a practice-led activity, and is studied and taught in Departments of Translation (as intermodal translation between the visual and the verbal).

The language and benefits of AD

AD practitioners bring their own style to their work. For example, some prefer to keep to pure description, while others offer some contextual background. But there is some standardisation in AD English, such as the sole use of the present tense, and a high proportion of adjectives. It is a particularly vivid form of expression.
We will explore how AD may enhance the experience of art for sighted people as well as the BPS community.

BPS people and touch description

BPS people are currently offered live AD sessions in many museums. These can be accompanied by simplified raised line drawings of the art works, or even touch tours. The tactile dimension of art has long been recognised. If BPS people verbalised this haptic experience, then this would enhance art description and provide a form of access to sighted people (who are not allowed to touch).

**Slab V from the East Frieze of the Parthenon:
Hera and Zeus seated with various attendants © The Trustees of the British Museum**

Bird, S., I. Jenkins and F. Levi. 1998. *Second Sight of the Parthenon Frieze*.
Fryer, L. 2016, *An Introduction to Audio Description: A Practical Guide*.
Hayhoe, S. 2017. *Blind Visitor Experiences at Art Museums*.
Kleege, G. 2018. *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art*.

What is British Sign Language (BSL)?

Sign languages are not simply manual versions of the local spoken language. BSL has a clear set of grammatical rules based on entirely different criteria from spoken English. There are estimated to be 50,000-70,000 people in the UK who state BSL as their preferred language. BSL users define themselves as 'Deaf' rather than 'deaf', to signal their identity as a cultural/linguistic minority.

BSL as a visual/spatial language

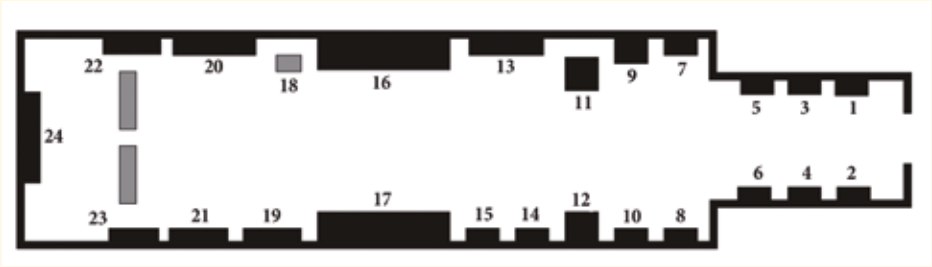
BSL is a visual language, with the potential for iconicity (comparable with mime) and cinematic elements, such as zooming. Certain grammatical features are visualised, such as role shift, whereby the signer becomes the characters in a narrative, signifying the switches between them through posture, body language, facial expression, and eye gaze. This is broadly equivalent to using direct speech in spoken or written language – but much more dramatic.

BSL is also a spatial language, with the signing space a canvas for reproducing scenes. Interactions may be depicted through spatial verbs, such as exchanges between people and/or institutions. Abstract concepts may be indicated spatially, such as a family tree or hierarchical structure. These qualities render it a particularly rich way of communicating about art, and many museums run Deaf-led tours in BSL (sometimes with an interpreter providing English voiceover).

**Slab V from the East Frieze of the Parthenon: peplos scene, with Athena and Hephaistos seated
© The Trustees of the British Museum**

Baker, A. (et al.) eds. 2016. *The Linguistics of Sign Languages: An Introduction*.
Mirzoeff, N. 1995. *Silent Poetry: Deafness, Sign, and Visual Culture in Modern France*.
Sacks, O. 1989. *Seeing Voices*.
Sutton-Spence, R. and B. Woll. 1999. *The Linguistics of British Sign Language*.

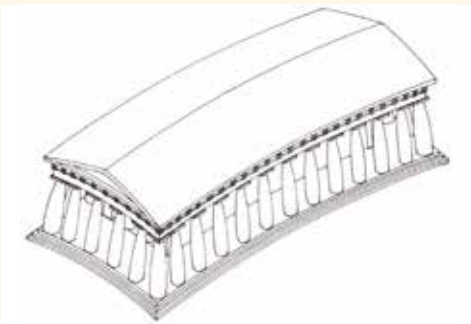
Room 18a



Drawn by Ellen Adams

1: The Building of the Parthenon	**13:** Cast from frieze
2: Persepolis and the Parthenon	**14:** Lord Elgin and the Parthenon
3: The Parthenon sculptures	**15:** Image of Lord Elgin and the firman
4: Image of Cyrus Cylinder, Persepolis frieze, Greek vase	**16:** Architectural fragments (metopes) and amphora
5: London and Athens	**17:** Pedimental fragments
6: The Parthenon and the Persians	**18:** Iris – the Long Look (about photograph 20)
7: The Acropolis	**19:** Sculpture of the Parthenon (about film 24)
8: The Parthenon's later life	**20:** Iris image (from East Pediment)
9: Model of the Acropolis	**21:** Viewing the sculptures
10: Images of the Parthenon over the centuries	**22:** The Parthenon and artistic tradition
11: Vase	**23:** Painting the sculptures
12: Architectural fragments	**24:** Film presentation

The Parthenon © Yair Haklai



Architectural refinements, from Ian Jenkins (2006), *Greek Architecture and its Sculpture*

The Parthenon was a remarkable structure, combining elements of the Doric and Ionic Orders. There were no true horizontal or vertical lines, in order to counteract certain optical illusions. For example, the platform bulged upwards in the centre, as a true horizontal line would appear to sag in the middle. Also, the columns tapered inwards slightly, otherwise it would seem that the roof was pushing them out.

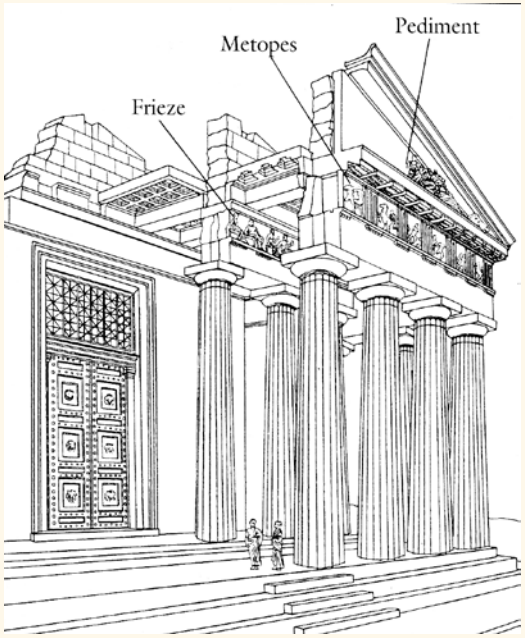
The Parthenon's sculpture

The Parthenon included three different sculptural spaces and methods.

Pediments: These sculptures were in the triangular gables on the narrow east and west sides. The sculptures were made in the round, even though their backs could not have been seen from the ground.

Metopes: There were 92 of these rectangular spaces, between the triglyphs of the outer Doric frieze and running around all four sides. The sculptures were carved in high relief.

Frieze: The Ionic frieze was a continuous band of sculpture in low relief that ran for a total of 160 metres or 524 feet, behind the outer Doric frieze.

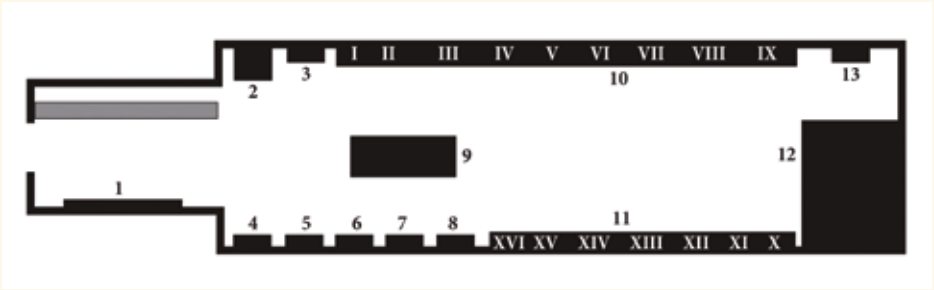


Position of Sculptures, from Ian Jenkins (2006), *Greek Architecture and its Sculpture*

Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1868) 'Phidias Showing the Frieze of the Parthenon to his Friends' © Alamy

The sculptures were meant to be on the outside of the building, rather than showcased in an art gallery as today. They were placed 12 metres or 40 feet above ground. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the gleaming white marble that we are accustomed to, the original sculptures were painted.

Room 18b



Drawn by Ellen Adams

1: The Parthenon Galleries	**8:** West Frieze of Parthenon
2: Frieze crown	**9:** Parthenon touch model
3: Polychrony painted decoration	**10:** Cast of the West Frieze (numbered blocks)
4: The Panathenaic Way	**11:** Cast of the West Frieze (numbered blocks)
5: The Acropolis	**12:** Column top (with life sized reconstruction)
6: Plan of Parthenon	**13:** The Doric Order of the Parthenon
7: The Parthenon Sculptures	

The Tiresias Project in the British Museum

Room 18b, inaugurated by David Blunkett in 1998, was designed with blind and partially sighted (BPS) people in mind. There is a touch model of the Parthenon, braille and raised line drawings are included in the information boards, and the casts may be touched as well as viewed. Also in 1998, Susan Bird, Ian Jenkins and Fabio Levi produced *Second Sight of the Parthenon Frieze*, a tactile book with raised line drawings. It is accompanied by a detailed audio description on tapes, which lead the listener through the raised images of the book. This approach works rather differently from standard audio books, which simply read out the written text.

Modelling and representing art in word and image

While curated for BPS people, Room 18b also demonstrates how sighted people can 'see' and understand art better through various forms of reproduction. The scale touch model (9) allows us to sense how the various parts fit together, while the column top and life sized reconstruction (12) convey the monumentality of the structure. There are numerous examples of 2D representations of the 3D architecture and sculptures, from photographs, plans, cutaways and simplified line drawings, all of which help us to grasp the original context and complexities of these fragments.

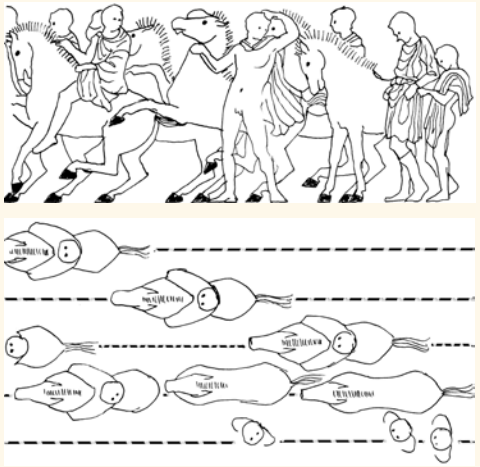
The Parthenon Frieze

The long continuous stretch of an Ionic frieze lends itself very well to a procession, in this case, a line of men, women, deities, animals and chariots wrapped 160 metres around the entire structure. This shows the Panathenaic Festival, held in honour of the goddess Athena. It was located behind the Doric frieze with metopes, so the continuous frieze would always have been partially obscured by the outer columns.

The image below is the very beginning of the north side of the frieze, which you can see in Room 18 just on your right as you enter, an apparent jumble of men, horses and a child carved just a few centimetres deep.

Slab XLVII, North Frieze © The Trustees of the British Museum.

When presented as raised line drawings, these allow the individual characters to be more easily distinguished by sight and touch. Certain features, such as men's heads and horses' heads and hooves, create invisible wavy lines rising and falling throughout the composition. Some figures are depicted in calm isolation, while others cleave together in a crescendo of intensity.



Their positions may be marked as on a musical stave from a bird's (or god's) eye view, looking down upon worshipping mortals. This offers a completely new perspective of the frieze for everyone, including sighted people, and reveals the visual musicality of the Parthenon frieze.

Drawn by Ellen Adams, after Bird, Jenkins and Levi (1998), *Second Sight of the Parthenon Frieze*, page 49. Above: simplified outline. Below: bird's eye view of same composition (originals are raised line drawings).

The pediment (east)

The East Pediment shows the birth of Athena, who sprang fully-grown from the head of her father, Zeus. The central portion is long destroyed, but we can see the impact of this astonishing event on the surviving figures. A female figure flees from the scene, while the nearby male identified as Dionysus appears unaware of the action.

The solution to filling the pediment's awkward corners is particularly poetic. On the left, the sun god Helios marks dawn by rising in his chariot, while the moon goddess Selene and her exhausted horses dip over the horizon on the right.

The sculptures are in the round, which means that their backs were also finished – although these would never have been seen. They are now set at eye level, so we are in a privileged position compared with fifth-century Athenians. The sculptures were probably painted.

East Pediment: possible identifications as Aphrodite and Dione © The Trustees of the British Museum.

We know the pediment's theme because of Pausanias, who wrote many centuries after the structure was built. We can guess the identity of individual figures, such as Dionysus. Scholars have also attempted to reconstruct what is now missing, with the help of early drawings. There are various stages to creating a full narrative of art works such as this: describing the fragments you can see today, reconstructing the full composition, recognizing the scene, and identifying the individuals.

The metopes (south)

The metopes on each side of the Parthenon depicted a particular theme, namely the war between the Athenians and the Amazons (west), the Trojan war (north), the battle between the gods and the giants (east) and the fight between the centaurs and the Lapiths (south). The nearly-square shape of each metope (1.2 metres high and slightly wider) suited the arrangement of two figures in combat. These blocks would have been painted, and were sculpted in deep relief. We can detect a variety of hands and abilities behind the surviving examples.

The metopes represent a frozen moment of time, dramatic episodes of a violent fight. Pain, triumph, sexual assault and the loss of life are depicted, vignettes presented in cartoon-like form. They offer fantastic examples of snapshot description and a variety of compositions under a common theme.

All of the examples in the British Museum are from the south side. Centaurs were mythical half-man half-horse creatures, while Lapiths were a northern Greek tribe.

Metopes XXX and XXVIII from the south side © The Trustees of the British Museum.

We can only describe what has survived. The metopes were badly damaged when the Parthenon was turned into a Christian Church, as the pagan iconography fell out of favour and the structure needed to be 'cleansed'. But the south side was less visited, being near the edge of the citadel, and less attacked – so these were the sculptures Lord Elgin decided to take back to England. A describer has the challenge of relating what is missing as well as what is there.

Access All Senses

Experiencing the Parthenon with audio description, touch and sign language

Event curated as part of the research project:
BLINDNESS, DEAFNESS, AND NEW APPRECIATIONS OF ANCIENT ART: SENSING THE PARTHENON GALLERIES IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

How do we experience and appreciate visual art? Studies generally assume that the viewer has 20/20 vision, and that people articulate their thoughts and feelings using a spoken/written language. But how does having a sensory impairment impact on this experience? This project argues that the perspective of deaf and blind or partially sighted people should also be acknowledged and explored. Furthermore, it contends that we may all benefit from the strategies devised to circumnavigate these impairments: namely, audio description, touch tours and sign language. The methodological novelties underpinning this project include innovative events curated in the British Museum (and beyond), and a unique museum access network for sensory impairments, based in London (MANSIL).

The classical legacy has greatly influenced our attitudes towards blindness and deafness, and our ableist assumptions to art appreciation. It is therefore fitting to set this event in the Parthenon Galleries of the British Museum, to see how we might deploy these famous sculptures to generate a radical, progressive change in these perceptions. You will find professional audio describers and Deaf art tour leaders (with British Sign Language interpreters) in Rooms 18, 18a and 18b, ready to demonstrate these modes of communication. They will be wearing sashes for identification: please drop by and enjoy a demonstration!

Project leader and event organiser:

Dr Ellen Adams
Senior Lecturer in Classical Art and Archaeology
Department of Classics
King's College London
ellen.adams@kcl.ac.uk
Please also see: www.mansil.uk

Acknowledgements

This event was funded by the Wellcome Trust, with support from King's College London. I am very grateful to numerous British Museum personnel, who have given their time and support to this project. I am also very grateful to the professionals contributing to this event (see separate sheet).

Back of Dionysus, East Pediment
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Front cover image: Dionysus, East Pediment © The Trustees of the British Museum