

## ‘NOW ART COMES’: THE PARTHENON AND RACIAL CONQUEST IN KANSAS CITY<sup>★</sup>

The Charles Keck reliefs on the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, MO, portray the triumph of white settlers over Native Americans, who are depicted as stereotypically aggressive and ‘barbaric’. Keck’s sculptures invite comparison to the metopes of the Parthenon, which depict the triumph of Greek and Athenian ‘civilization’ over ‘barbarism’. The central focus of Keck’s reliefs is Fortitude, an allegorical figure whose image throughout art history is indebted to depictions of Athena and Minerva, and who serves for the Nelson-Atkins as a modern American proxy for the Athenian goddess. As the Periclean building programme proclaimed Athenian superiority and had long-term cultural and economic impacts for Athens, the Nelson-Atkins is intimately connected to the economic and urban development of Kansas City, including its history of racist real estate practices, engineered by a founding trustee of the museum, which became a national model.

**Keywords:** Parthenon, Acropolis, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Athena, Fortitude, Pericles, racism, classics in American urban planning

The Periclean redevelopment of the Acropolis envisioned the monumental spectacles at the centre of the *polis* as a magnificent display of Athenian power, not only to contemporaries, but to any who might see their splendours in the future (Thuc. 2.41–2; Plut. *Per.* 12.1).<sup>1</sup> Plutarch suggests that Pericles understood the significant economic impact that such redevelopment plans could have in the near term, cataloguing the great variety of materials, crafts, and especially craftsmen and labourers needed (Plut. *Per.* 12.5–7).<sup>2</sup> Given Pericles’ practical,

<sup>★</sup> My sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewer, who made many very helpful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> P. Valavanis, ‘The Akropolis’, in J. Neils and D. K. Rogers (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Athens* (Cambridge, 2021), 68, 81.

<sup>2</sup> C. H. Lyttkens and H. Gerding, ‘Understanding the Politics of Pericles around 450 BCE: The Benefits of an Economic Perspective’, in M. Canevaro, A. Erskine, B. Gray, and J. Ober (eds.), *Ancient Greek History and Contemporary Social Science* (Edinburgh, 2018), 287–8.

short-term economic considerations in pushing the revitalization of the Athenian Acropolis, one wonders if he also foresaw the extraordinarily long-term cultural and economic impact of his plans. After all, the Athens that now exists, in political, cultural, economic, and imaginary terms, would not exist, except for Pericles' splendid renewal of his city's core.

What would Pericles make of the sprawling modern metropolis emanating from the ancient centre, emerging from the ruins of his building programme, the Plaka swarming with cultural tourists? As Pericles was reinventing the status of Athens in the middle of the fifth century BCE, envisioning an urban centre to match the magnificence of Athenian imperial power in cultural and aesthetic terms, he may have sensed the economic impacts that such cultural redevelopment would bring to his city, even in the distant future. Thucydides' version of Pericles directly relates the greatness of Athenian power, which results in economic benefit to Athens, to the *τρόποι* ('habits' or 'character') that define the city's culture (2.38.2 with 2.41.2), including Athenian love of aesthetic beauty (*φιλοκαλοῦμεν*, 2.40.1).<sup>3</sup> Bosworth specifically associates the Athenian love of beauty with the 'buildings of the Acropolis',<sup>4</sup> which had been overhauled by Pericles. The renewed Acropolis not only symbolizes Athenian power and cultural prestige, it enacts and creates Athenian power and cultural prestige, which, in turn, results in lasting economic benefits to the city, even in our own day.

The increasing wealth and cultural and aesthetic prestige that resulted from the empire were central to Athenian civic and religious display and related directly to the grandeur of the renewed Acropolis. Subjects from outside the city were compelled to visit the monuments of the Periclean programme. The Panathenaic Procession, which included contingents of the Athenian colonies (from at least the 430s) and subject-allies (from at least 425), ended on the Acropolis.<sup>5</sup> The buildings of the Acropolis were used as treasuries,<sup>6</sup> and the tribute of

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation follows A. B. Bosworth, 'The Historical Context of Thucydides' Funeral Oration', *JHS* 120 (2000), 10–11 and rejects J. S. Rusten, *Thucydides. The Peloponnesian War: Book II* (Cambridge, 1989), 152–4, on 40.1–2.

<sup>4</sup> Bosworth (n. 3), 11.

<sup>5</sup> J. L. Shear, *Serving Athena. The Festival of the Panathenaia and the Construction of Athenian Identities* (Cambridge, 2021), 118, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Thuc. 2.13; J. M. Hurwit, *The Acropolis in the Age of Pericles* (Cambridge, 2004), 113; Valavanis, (n. 1) 67, 70; J. Z. van Rookhuijzen, 'The Parthenon Treasury on the Acropolis of Athens', *AJA* 124 (2020), 3–35; V. Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens* (Princeton, 2014), 66; L. Kallet,

the allies, displayed so ostentatiously in the Theatre of Dionysus during the Greater Dionysia,<sup>7</sup> would probably have been housed on the Acropolis after 454, and may have been used to help fund the Periclean building programme.<sup>8</sup>

Even after the decrease in power and prestige that followed from the loss of the Peloponnesian War and the Macedonian and Roman conquests, Athens remained a cultural destination, attracting Roman elites as educational tourists, for example.<sup>9</sup> But the buildings of the Acropolis themselves were also a draw for visitors. In the mid-third century BCE, the travel writer Heraclides Criticus was dismissive of the mundane aspects of Athens (noting its poor housing stock and lack of water), but raved about the Parthenon, singled out as ἄξιον θεᾶς ('worth seeing'), and other monumental constructions (from the Periclean and other eras). This suggests that the structures associated with Athens' aesthetic and cultural glory helped to maintain it as a worthwhile destination.<sup>10</sup>

Much later, in the second century CE, the *Panathenaic* of Aelius Aristides linked the fifth-century BCE power, culture, and glory of Athens directly with its fifth-century building projects (143) and concluded with a call for contemporary followers of Hellenic civilization (which had now demonstrated its supposed superiority by its cultural domination of Romans and barbarians [225–33]) to worship the Acropolis of the Athenians (275). Like Aelius Aristides, modern day interpreters have cited the Acropolis as a symbol of Greek and European culture, frequently in contrast to so-called 'barbarians'. The Acropolis, and especially the Parthenon, frequently symbolized the triumph of (Greek or European) civilization in the nineteenth century. Leo Von Klenze (who was instrumental in getting the Acropolis recognized as an archaeological site in the wake of the Greek War of Independence), in an 1834 speech before King Otto of Greece, associated the newly begun restoration of the Parthenon with 'civilisation and glory',

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'Wealth, Power, and Prestige: Athens at Home and Abroad', in J. Neils (ed.), *The Parthenon. From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 2005), 53 with n. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Shear (n. 5) 325–6; Isoc. 8.82.

<sup>8</sup> Hurwit (n. 6), 96–7; P. J. Rhodes, 'The Organization of Athenian Public Finance', *G&R* 60 (2013), 205.

<sup>9</sup> E. J. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley, 2006), 9–10, 22.

<sup>10</sup> J. McInerney, 'Heraclides Criticus and the Problem of Taste', in I. Sluiter and R. M. Rosen (eds.), *Aesthetic Value in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden, 2012), 247–9, which quote F. Jacoby *FGH* 369a F 1.1.

which would wipe away evidence of the ‘barbarian period’ now ended.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, after completing his excavations in 1890, Panayiotis Kavvadias wrote,

Greece presents the Acropolis to the civilised world, a monument of Greek genius, dignified, purified of all barbarity, a model, unique repository of outstanding works of ancient art, which challenges all civilised peoples, without distinction, to study, collaboration and noble rivalry in order to advance the science of archaeology.<sup>12</sup>

The Parthenon and other monuments on the Acropolis, now stripped of all post-classical layers, become key symbols in modern Greek nationalism and a draw for Western tourists, mirroring the modern West’s fetishization of classical Greece as the source of its own supposed cultural glory. Just as the unexcavated jumble of historical and archaeological layers that had preceded Greek independence had attracted European artists and tourists, so this newly rediscovered monument to Greek, and especially Periclean antiquity, held in contrast to a perceived barbarism by both ancients and moderns, would attract subsequent generations of cultural pilgrims.<sup>13</sup> Pericles would surely be proud of the refurbished economic and cultural power of his fifth-century BCE investments in city beautification!

### Meanwhile, in Kansas City . . .

As Athenian cultural glory has once again rendered an economic benefit to Athens in the modern age, the symbolic power and economic instincts behind the Periclean programme would be self-consciously mirrored and adapted by important figures in the history of Kansas

<sup>11</sup> F. Mallouchou-Tufano, ‘The Vicissitudes of the Athenian Acropolis in the 19th Century: From Castle to Monument’, in P. Valavanis (ed.) and D. Hardy (trans.), *Great Moments in Greek Archaeology* (Los Angeles, 2007), 39–40 – which also translate Klenze’s speech, as quoted here.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Mallouchou-Tufano (n. 11), 53.

<sup>13</sup> For overviews, see Mallouchou-Tufano (n. 11) and F. Mallouchou-Tufano, ‘The Parthenon from Cyriacus of Ancona to Frédéric Boissonas: Description, Research and Depiction’, in P. Tournikiotis (ed.), *The Parthenon and its Impact in Modern Times* (Athens, 1994), 164–99. On the links between classical archaeology and the Acropolis to nationalism and ‘western’ conceptions of Greek antiquity, see Y. Hamilakis, *The Nation and its Ruins. Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece* (Oxford, 2007), 8–20, 214–24, 231–2, 253–5; D. Plantzos, ‘Archaeology and Hellenic Identity, 1896–2004: The Frustrated Vision’, in D. Damaskos and D. Plantzos (eds.), *A Singular Antiquity. Archaeology and Hellenic Identity in Twentieth-Century Greece* (Athens, 2008), 14–21. For the ‘cleansing’ of the Acropolis of post-classical layers in light of modern Greek identity, see R. Greenberg and Y. Hamilakis, *Archaeology, Nation, and Race. Confronting the Past, Decolonizing the Future in Greece and Israel* (Cambridge, 2022), 93–8.

City, Missouri, to boost economic development and stake a claim to cultural prestige. Not long after the modern rediscovery and reconstruction of the Athenian Acropolis was taking shape, still less than a century after Elgin brought the Parthenon marbles to London – amazingly, the first instance of genuine classical Greek sculpture in modern Western Europe<sup>14</sup> – Thomas Wight and Charles Keck, the architect of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City and the sculptor of its suite of exterior decorative bas-reliefs, would themselves visit Athens.<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps no surprise, given the lofty rhetoric that accompanied the Parthenon's rebirth during the nineteenth century and the removal of all non-antique buildings from the Acropolis,<sup>16</sup> that Wight's Kansas City museum and Keck's ornamentation of that building would be profoundly influenced by the Parthenon's associations with the triumph of civilization over 'barbarism', as expressed by modern commentators, ancient Greeks, and the metopes of the Parthenon itself.

Wight and Keck were not the only ones to mimic, consciously or not, ancient claims about the virtues of temple-building. It is hard, for instance, not to think of Plutarch's catalogue of the materials and craftsmen employed in Pericles' building programme (*Per.* 12.6–7) when reading the 1935 speech of J. C. Nichols to the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, a little over a year after the opening of the Nelson-Atkins. Like Pericles before him, the important Kansas City developer and founding trustee of the museum understood cultural and economic development as intimately related. Nichols catalogues the numerous ways that a publicly accessible repository of art could benefit local industries, such as by providing regional furniture

<sup>14</sup> Mallouchou-Tufano (n. 13), 164.

<sup>15</sup> Wight worked for McKim, Mead & White during the construction of the McKim Building of the Boston Public Library. Shortly before construction ended (1895), McKim invited Wight to the New York offices. Wight went to the American Academy in Rome sometime after that, but returned in time to serve as a drafter for the J. P. Morgan Library, for which construction began in 1902. So Wight must have visited the Parthenon sometime between 1895 and 1902. See R. B. Fowler, 'A Dream Put into a Drawing was Thomas Wight's Turning Point', *The Kansas City Star*, 26 April 1931, C6; <<https://www.themorgan.org/architecture>>, accessed 2 June 2023; <<https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/bookmans-paradise/who-built-the-bookmans-paradise>>, accessed 2 June 2023; <<https://www.bpl.org/mckim-points-of-interest/>>, accessed 2 June 2023. Keck travelled to Greece during his time at the American Academy in Rome, from 1900–1905. Charles Keck papers, c.1905–c.1954, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 1, Folder 4, 'Speech to the National Sculptors Society' [sic], 2–3; Charles Keck papers, c.1905–c.1954, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 1, Folder 1, 'Work Done 1905–1922', 1.

<sup>16</sup> Mallouchou-Tufano (n. 11), 51.

makers, jewellers, architects, glass makers, terracotta producers, and manufacturers of wallpaper with aesthetic models of exceptional quality.<sup>17</sup> A Pericles of the American Middle West, the developer views the museum not merely as a cultural institution, but as a spur to industrial activity. Nichols emphasizes the unity of aesthetic and pragmatic purposes later in the same speech: ‘Perhaps the race for commercial supremacy in the Middle West depends upon the extent to which we apply art in [the] manufacture of our great storehouse of raw materials.’<sup>18</sup>

As one of the three founding trustees of the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Nichols delivered the dedicatory speech at its opening ceremonies on 11 December 1933. Like the Pericles of Thucydides’ funeral oration, Nichols links conquest and culture, claiming the ‘civilizing’ influence of an art museum as the next stage in the conquest of the West by white settlers:

The generations just behind conquered a wilderness of prairie and of plain. Now art comes. May our people assert themselves from this day forward in higher aspirations, loftier ideals and nobler conceptions of the imperishable values of life.<sup>19</sup>

The Kansas City developer envisions the museum not only as an economic boon, but as a mark of transition from conquest to cultural development. Nichols is not speaking in ideal terms only. His ideas about how to ‘civilize’ and develop the landscape of Kansas City are greatly influential, not only locally, but in the United States more broadly. Nichols provided national models not only for the creation of regional shopping centres, but for how to use racially restrictive real estate covenants to segregate residential communities in perpetuity, a legacy from which the city still suffers.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> J. C. Nichols in *Planning for Permanence. The Speeches of J.C. Nichols*, The State Historical Society of Missouri, ‘Value of the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum of Fine Arts to Kansas City and the Middle West’ (9 January 1935), 3–4, The J. C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN029, <<https://files.shsmo.org/manuscripts/kansas-city/nichols/JCN029.pdf>>, accessed 2 June 2023.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> J. C. Nichols, ‘Dedicatory Talk by J. C. Nichols on the Occasion of the Opening of the W. R. Nelson Collection of Art’, 1933, J. C. Nichols Nelson Trust Office Files, RG 80/10, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>20</sup> For information about Nichols’ dedicatory speech, see K. C. Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. A History* (Columbia, MO, 2020), 120–1; M. Churchman and S. Erbes, *High Ideals and Aspirations. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art 1933–1993* (Kansas City, MO, 1993), 119. For information about Nichols’ influence on real estate development and his racist innovations in the use of covenants, see below and notes 84–7.

Nichols' aspirations for the Nelson-Atkins to become a cultural landmark have been fulfilled. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, has embodied regional aspirations for commercial, civic, and cultural development since its earliest conception in the bequests of Mary Atkins (1911) and William Rockhill Nelson (1915). It is still very much a source of local civic pride and communal identity. The museum houses more than 42,000 works of art, and it continues to be embraced by tourists and residents.<sup>21</sup> It is a common sight around town to see bumper stickers, badges, coffee mugs, and other paraphernalia featuring the museum's most famous sculptures: four enormous shuttlecocks of aluminium, fibreglass, and plastic by husband-and-wife team Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen (Figure 1).<sup>22</sup> The Nelson-Atkins has also garnered some national attention. In 2015, for instance, it was ranked first on Yelp's list of the top museums in the United States, by patron ranking. At that time, *The Kansas City Star*, which was originally founded by Nelson and whose sale of that paper and *The Kansas City Times* provided funds for the trust that would ultimately lead to the museum's creation, noted the ranking with pride and ran an article under the headline: 'Nelson-Atkins is first in Yelp's ranking of best U.S. museums...' The first line of the article makes the lasting symbolic power of the Nelson-Atkins very clear: 'Just call us culture city'.<sup>23</sup>

The Nelson-Atkins has thus always been and remains a self-conscious symbol and measure of the cultural and economic value of Kansas City and its region, just as the Parthenon and other buildings of the Acropolis were and continue to be for Athens. And, again like the Athenian forebear, associations with civic pride and 'civilizing' intent are an integral part of the museum's origin and its continuing legacy and self-presentation. The museum website continues to advertise its 'civilizing' function and connects that purpose directly to its main namesake:

William Rockhill Nelson, founder of *The Kansas City Star* and a real estate developer, was convinced that for a city to be truly civilized, art and culture were necessities. When

<sup>21</sup> <<https://nelson-atkins.org/about/#history>>, accessed 2 June 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Scattered over the north and south lawns as if the monumental, neoclassical structure of the museum itself were a badminton net, each titanic birdie weighs nearly three tons and stands eighteen feet tall. <<https://art.nelson-atkins.org/objects/16574>>, accessed 2 June 2023.

<sup>23</sup> K. Lu, 'Nelson-Atkins is First in Yelp's Ranking of best US museums; World War I Museum is fifth', *The Kansas City Star* (2015), 14 December 2015, <<https://www.kansascity.com/entertainment/article49766630.html>>, accessed 2 June 2023.



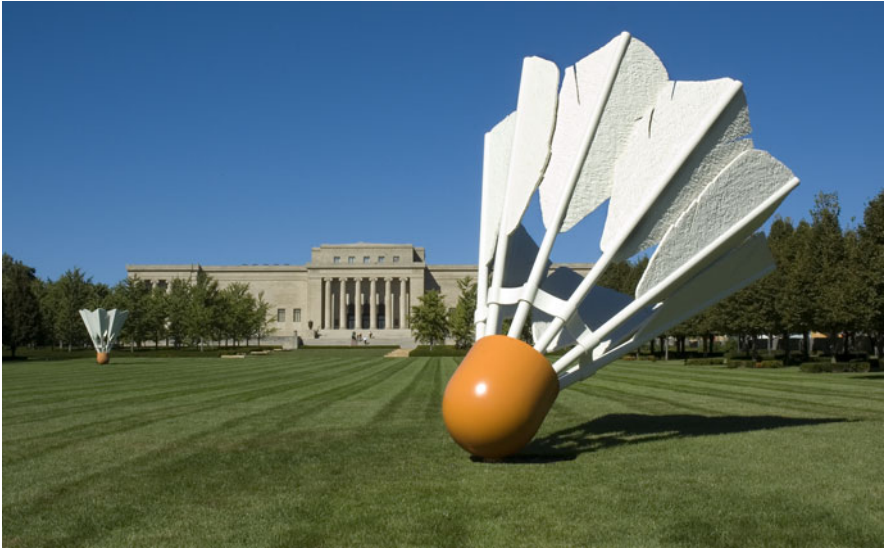


Figure 1. Claes Oldenburg (American, born Sweden, 1929–2022) and Coosje van Bruggen (American, born The Netherlands, 1942–2009): *Shuttlecocks*, 1994. Aluminium, fibreglass-reinforced plastic, paint, 230 9/16 × 191 7/8 inches (585.6 × 487.4 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the Sosland Family, F94-1/1-4. © Estate of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. Image courtesy Nelson-Atkins Media Services.

he died in 1915, at the direction of his will the bulk of his estate was used to establish the William Rockhill Nelson Trust for the purchase of works of art.<sup>24</sup>

Crucially, in asserting these civilizational goals for the Midwest, the founders, designers, and conceivers of the Nelson-Atkins Museum frequently cite European and classical ‘civilization’ in their framing of the use and value of art and art museums. Contemporaries depicted the founding donors of the Nelson-Atkins Museum as forces for commercial, civic, and cultural development in Kansas City, invoking Europe and the classical world to do so.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> <<https://www.nelson-atkins.org/about/>>, accessed 2 June 2023. See Wolferman (n. 20), Chs. 1–2 for detailed discussion of the bequests of Atkins and Nelson.

<sup>25</sup> Contemporary commentators directly attribute both Mary Atkins’ and William Rockhill Nelson’s bequests for the foundation of an art museum to their European travels, and they associate the possibility of a museum with civic and cultural development. Indeed, Nelson is compared in one column from the *KC Star* to Lorenzo Medici, there connected with the Roman past and erroneously named as the founder of the Uffizi. For Atkins, see: ‘Mary Atkins Memorial Services Revives Memorial of Museum Founder’, *The Kansas City Times*, 22 October



Most importantly, the museum itself, including its neoclassical structure and the programme of bas-relief friezes on its east, south, and west façades, specifically evoke the Athenian Parthenon, especially the reliefs of the metopes. The friezes by Charles Keck on the exterior of the Nelson-Atkins mirror ancient Athenian tropes of cultural superiority to support a modern American narrative of racial and cultural superiority. Just as the metopes on the Parthenon portray the triumph of Greek and Athenian civilization over forces of barbaric disorder, so the reliefs on the Nelson-Atkins depict the triumph of the white settlers of the Kansas City region over the Native inhabitants, who are depicted in aggressive, barbaric terms. Scenes of this racialized narrative of white victory over Native Americans are dominated by Keck's portrayal of Fortitude, an allegorical figure whose image throughout art history is indebted to depictions of Athena and her Roman counterpart Minerva, and who serves in the Nelson-Atkins reliefs as a modern American proxy for the Athenian goddess honoured at the Parthenon.<sup>26</sup>

### Parthenon on the prairie

In April of 1931, still more than two years before the Nelson-Atkins opened, its architect Thomas Wight and *Star* reporter Richard Fowler were gazing up at the south façade of the building, still under construction, as Wight breathlessly described the Nelson and its

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1936, D/20; 'Gift for Art is Timely', *The Kansas City Times*, 17 October 1911, 3. For Nelson, see: 'If Thou Seek His Monument. . .', *The Kansas City Star*, 10 December 1933, D10.

<sup>26</sup> The land on which the Nelson-Atkins sits was the home to Missouria, Oto, Kansa, Osage, Shawnee, and Delaware Peoples, as noted in the Museum's 'Land Acknowledgement': <<https://nelson-atkins.org/about/land-acknowledgment/>>, accessed 2 June 2023. For an overview of how modern constructs of Western civilization and Greek antiquity have been used to support white supremacy, see R. F. Kennedy, "'Western Civilization': White Supremacy and the Myth of a White Ancient Greece", in E. Niklasson (ed.), *Polarized Pasts. Heritage and Belonging in Times of Political Polarization* (New York, 2023), 88–109. The invocation of the classical architectural antecedents to support constructions of white supremacy in the United States does not begin with the Nelson-Atkins. S. Marquardt has situated the near-contemporary (1931) reconstruction of the Parthenon in Nashville in the context of white supremacy: S. Marquardt, 'The Nashville Parthenon Glorifies Ancient Greece – and the Confederacy', *Eidolon* (2018), 15 January, <<https://eidolon.pub/the-heirs-of-athens-of-the-south-a8b730b84de3>>, accessed 29 March 2024; see also B. F. Wilson III, *The Parthenon of Pericles and its Reproduction in America* (Nashville, 1937), 18–21, where the reproduction of the Parthenon is implicitly linked to an idealized, slave-holding past. Thomas Jefferson's neoclassical architectural designs and white supremacy have been linked in M. O. Wilson, 'Race, Reason, and the Architecture of Jefferson's Statehouse', in L. DeWitt and C. Piper (eds.), *Thomas Jefferson. Architect* (Norfolk, 2019), 88–9, 95.

grounds, juxtaposing classical terminology with a place name more suggestive of the midwestern setting, at the edge of the Great Plains:

Here the Ionic columns without the usual fluting, there the bronze statue with the vases on either side...the bas relief panels telling the history of the west...the Classical landscaping<sup>[27]</sup> all the way down to Brush Creek.<sup>28</sup>

Wight's rationale for his classicism is partly pragmatic, joining cultural and economic concerns. Classical principles had proven appeal, and there were 2.5 million dollars at stake.<sup>29</sup> But in addition to these conservative and commercial impulses, the desire to measure one's own creation against an idealized classical predecessor is clearly inspiring to Wight. Standing on the south grounds of the museum, this building of his own design had caused him to cry out, 'Thank God I'm an architect!' Importantly, according to the *Star*, he subsequently claims to have first uttered this same phrase on looking at the Parthenon while in Athens:

There before him was the Parthenon – simple, magnificent even in ruins. Five minutes he stood without a sound. Then for the first time he said, 'Thank God, I'm an architect!'<sup>30</sup>

Wight's exclamation of gratitude for his chosen profession, first uttered before the Parthenon and now again before a museum of his own design, knits the two buildings together in the architect's own narrative of his career.<sup>31</sup> The notion of remaking the south grounds of the museum in classical guise speaks to the project of the museum as a whole, which contemporaries imagined as part of a larger refashioning of Kansas City, from midwestern cow-town to cultured metropolis.<sup>32</sup>

Like the Parthenon, the Nelson-Atkins is adorned with relief panels depicting themes of local cultural significance in the eyes of its creators. Wight describes his intentions for the bas-relief panels in his 1930 specifications for the building: 'It is the intention to depict historical events pertaining to this vicinity in these panels, and they must be

<sup>27</sup> Wight's more classicizing vision for the grounds did not materialize. An outside landscape architecture firm was hired, which carried out its own designs. See Churchman and Erbes (n. 20), 133–40.

<sup>28</sup> Fowler (n. 15). The Nelson-Atkins opened to the public on 11 December 1933 (Churchman and Erbes [n. 20], 39).

<sup>29</sup> Fowler (n. 15). See also Churchman and Erbes (n. 20), 122ff.

<sup>30</sup> Fowler (n. 15).

<sup>31</sup> See n. 15 for Wight's likely dates of travel to the Parthenon.

<sup>32</sup> See n. 25. See Wolferman (n. 20), 21–5 on Nelson's efforts at the beautification and modernization of Kansas City.

correct in every way.’<sup>33</sup> Wight specifies in addition that the panels are subject to his own approval, both in the sketching and modelling stages.<sup>34</sup> Wight’s prior approval of the designs is significant in that he clearly envisioned the building as a whole in classicizing terms, and he referenced the Parthenon in his descriptions of the building to Fowler in the *Star* during its construction. These associations by Wight of his own designs with the Parthenon, as well as the details of Keck’s bas-relief friezes, suggest that the depiction of historical events of regional importance was also part of this larger reception of the Parthenon, as will become clear.

The sculptor that Wight commissioned for the bas-relief panels on the Nelson’s eastern, southern, and western façades was Charles Keck, a well-known sculptor of public monuments who had studied with Saint-Gaudens and worked with the architect previously.<sup>35</sup> Keck acknowledged Wight’s classicism, as well as his own, while simultaneously expressing a desire to use classically inspired forms to express American themes. The 19 March 1932 edition of *The Kansas City Star* summarized the sculptor’s views on the matter: ‘Mr. Keck says it is frequently the fault of the architect that classic themes are used to decorate classic buildings in America.’<sup>36</sup> It was not the classical style of the building that Keck took issue with, but the use of classical themes in the ornamentation of the structure. Keck praised the design of the Nelson-Atkins, saying, ‘[s]o many things in the classic manner are cold, but this has life, warmth, vitality. It is just as fine as the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, and really much bigger in feeling’.<sup>37</sup> Instead of requesting classical themes for the panels, Wight had specified that they were to be inspired by local history.<sup>38</sup> Keck was enthusiastic for this subject matter.

This is the kind of work I like to do, and I like the idea of American themes for an American building. Why should we repeat constantly the history of Greece on our

<sup>33</sup> T. Wight, Plans, Drawings, Specs, etc., 1930, Box 1, Folder: ‘General Specifications...Nelson Gallery...Atkins Museum’, page 30, ‘Sculptural Panels’, RG 68/01, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives, Kansas City, Missouri. See also the transcript of *A Frame of Mind. Episode 3: First You Have to See It*, a podcast associated with the Nelson-Atkins: <<https://nelson-atkins.org/nelson-atkins-at-home/listen-at-home/frame-of-mind/have-to-see-it/transcript/>>, accessed 4 June 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Wight, ‘General Specifications’ (n. 33), 29.

<sup>35</sup> Churchman and Erbes (n. 20), 128.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Amazed at Art Gallery’, *The Kansas City Star*, 19 March 1932, 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Wight, ‘General Specifications’ (n. 33), 30.

classic buildings when we have a country of our own with an interesting and picturesque history?<sup>39</sup>

While Keck did follow Wight's specifications to design reliefs relevant to local themes, he evidently wished to ensure that these local themes also had resonance within a broader American context.

Despite his insistence that American buildings be ornamented with American scenes, Keck held ancient Greek sculpture as a formal ideal for his own period and had completed studies in Greece and Rome.<sup>40</sup> He won the Rinehart Scholarship in 1899 to study at the American Academy in Rome for five years. Keck studied in Italy, France, and Greece, with briefer periods of travel in Germany and England.<sup>41</sup> In a speech from the same period as his design of the relief panels for the Nelson-Atkins, Keck articulated his view that Greek principles must undergird modern sculpture.

In regard to the modern movement, I think you will agree with me that those who produce the best modern sculpture are those who have had a thorough classic training. They know that the Greek principles were founded on simplicity, and have taken those early forms of Greece and are fitting them to the present day needs.<sup>42</sup>

He went on to emphasize that emulation of Greek formal principles was one of the key requirements for the success of his contemporaries: '...so long as there are a number of the artists who will uphold classic traditions and stand as firm as the Rock of Gibraltar in upholding the Greek ideal...'<sup>43</sup>

Although the sculptor clearly desired to veer from classicism in the thematic content of his work for the Nelson-Atkins, I suggest that the ideology of his reliefs, while drawn from an array of old American tropes about race and conquest, also resembles chauvinistic ideology of the Parthenon metopes.<sup>44</sup> Very significantly, the relief-sculptural programme of the Parthenon metopes depicts four mythological battles between the forces of civilization and barbarism, situating Athena, as

<sup>39</sup> 'Amazed at Art Gallery' (n. 36).

<sup>40</sup> Keck, 'Speech to the National Sculptors Society' (n. 15), 2–3. See also discussion in n. 15.

<sup>41</sup> Keck, 'Work Done' (n. 15), 1. See also discussion in n. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Keck papers, c.1905–c.1954, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 1, Folder 4, 'Speech to Allied Artists', 1–2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Churchman and Erbes (n. 20), 129–30, discuss the formal resemblance of the Nelson-Atkins reliefs to the frieze and metopes of the Parthenon and connect the grandeur of Keck's figure of Fortitude to the depiction of divinities on the Greek temple. However, the ideological connections to be discussed here are not explained by Churchman and Erbes. See also Wolferman (n. 20), 124, who notes the racial ideology of the Keck reliefs.

well as Athens itself, as the patrons of civilization, in opposition to the forces of destructive chaos.<sup>45</sup> On the Parthenon's east metope appears a battle between the Olympian gods and the giants (gigantomachy); in the south is a fight between the human tribe of Lapiths and the mythological, half-horse race of centaurs; in the west, human soldiers fight the Amazons; and in the north, Greeks sack the city of Troy. It is significant that the Parthenon was part of the Periclean effort to refurbish the Acropolis, which had been destroyed during the Persian sack of Athens in 480 BCE.<sup>46</sup> The Classical Parthenon sat on the foundations of an older Parthenon (built in thanks for the victory at Marathon in 490), which had been ruined during the sack.<sup>47</sup> This new temple to Athena was a response to the sufferings and ultimate victories of the Persian War, and it used the sculptural programme of the metopes as a means of contrasting the triumph of Greek, especially Athenian, civilization over Persian 'barbarity'.<sup>48</sup> It is very possible that Wight and Keck could have been exposed to rhetoric about the Parthenon that trumpeted the Athenian monument as an example of the victory of 'civilization' over 'barbarity'. As we have seen, modern commentators were making such claims about the newly restored Acropolis, and especially the Parthenon, as a symbol of Greek, civilized triumph over barbarity by the time Wight and Keck visited Athens (and Keck probably visited the British Museum as well, which housed a portion of the Parthenon sculptures),<sup>49</sup> long before they worked on the design and ornamentation of the Nelson-Atkins.<sup>50</sup> Importantly, Michaelis' influential 1871 study of the Parthenon had already argued that the sculptural programme of the metopes celebrated the defeat of Persian barbarism by Athenian culture.<sup>51</sup>

This quasi-mythological opposition between Greeks and Persians is also evident in contemporary literary accounts. Already in 472 BCE, only seven years after final Greek victories in the Persian Wars, Aeschylus' *Persae* depicts the Persian royal court on the tragic stage,

<sup>45</sup> R. Kousser, 'Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis', *The Art Bulletin* 91 (2009), 277; K. A. Schwab, 'Celebrations of Victory: The Metopes of the Parthenon', in J. Neils (ed.), *The Parthenon. From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 2005), 167.

<sup>46</sup> Hurwit (n. 6) 106, 115–16.

<sup>47</sup> Kousser (n. 45), 275; Valavanis (n. 1), 66.

<sup>48</sup> Kousser (n. 45), 263, 275–7; Valavanis (n. 1), 74.

<sup>49</sup> In any event, the Acropolis Museum in Athens displayed casts of the Elgin Marbles (Mallouchou-Tufano [n. 11], 48–9).

<sup>50</sup> See n. 15.

<sup>51</sup> A. Michaelis, *Der Parthenon* (Leipzig, 1871), 36 §31.

on which recent historical events were usually shunned in favour of myth. That play (807–22) specifically contextualizes the Persian defeats in light of their hubristic destruction of Greek altars, which must include the older Parthenon, over which the classical Parthenon was constructed.<sup>52</sup> Scenes like this are part of a larger expression of Greek, especially Athenian, cultural superiority over the vanquished Persians.<sup>53</sup> Herodotus, roughly contemporary with the construction of the Parthenon and an enthusiastic observer of cultural differences,<sup>54</sup> locates the Persian Wars in a chain of conflicts between Greece and Asia, stretching back into mythic time, to the Trojan War and beyond (1.1–5).<sup>55</sup> More broadly, at Book 7.140–3, Herodotus emphasizes the destruction of Athens and the temples of the Acropolis, famously recounting the oracles that the Athenians receive from Delphi in 480 BCE, one of which warns of the coming destruction of temples (140.3), and the other of which advises that the Athenians flee to their ‘wooden walls’ (ships), abandoning the city to destruction (141.3–4). At 8.144.1–2, the Athenians declare that their first motivation to remain with the Greeks against the ‘barbarian’ is that their temples and statues of the Gods have been burned and destroyed. Herodotus immediately invokes ethnic allegiance as a secondary rationale (8.144.2), contrasting Greeks with non-Greeks based on kinship, language, religious practice, and lifestyle.<sup>56</sup> The Greek victory over ‘barbaric’ Persia becomes a defining success of the fifth century in Greek, especially Athenian, rhetoric.<sup>57</sup> Persia in fifth-century Athens and elsewhere becomes a great, stereotyped threat, the prototypical ‘barbarian’ and yet also the object of emulation.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian. Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford, 1989), 56–101. For more recent debate and overview, see J. M. Hall, ‘Ancient Greek Ethnicities: Towards a Reassessment’, *BICS* 58 (2015), 24–5.

<sup>53</sup> E. Hall (n. 52), 99–100.

<sup>54</sup> See T. J. Figueira, ‘Introduction’, in T. J. Figueira and C. Soares (eds.), *Ethnicity and Identity in Herodotus* (London, 2020), 1–7, for an overview of important themes related to ethnicity in Herodotus, especially p. 7, which outlines the key differences between Greek and non-Greek ethnicity for Herodotus.

<sup>55</sup> See also T. Harrison, ‘The Persian Invasions’, in E. J. Bakker, I. J. F. de Jong, and H. van Wees (eds.), *Brill’s Companion to Herodotus* (Leiden, 2002), 553.

<sup>56</sup> On ethnicity in Herodotus, see R. V. Munson, ‘Herodotus and Ethnicity’, in J. McInerney (ed.), *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Chichester and Malden, MA, 2014), 341–55.

<sup>57</sup> P. J. Rhodes, ‘The Impact of the Persian Wars on Classical Greece’, in E. Bridges, E. Hall, and P. J. Rhodes (eds.), *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars. Antiquity to the Third Millennium* (Oxford, 2007), 36.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 36–8.

As will become clear, a similar opposition between a victorious, culturally superior civilization and a vanquished, barbaric foe will be central to Keck's bas-reliefs on the Nelson-Atkins. Especially given the central role in his visual narrative of Fortitude, a female deity derived ultimately from Minerva and Athena, there are striking parallels between Keck's suite of reliefs and the culturally and racially charged programme of the Parthenon metopes.

Keck provided descriptions of the panels he completed for the Nelson-Atkins, which, like Nichols' dedicatory speech, envision the cultural refinement of the museum as the outcome of conquest and dramatize the defeat of a wilderness depicted as barbaric by forces of civilization.<sup>59</sup> These descriptions are preserved in his personal papers, and they were also quoted and summarized in *The Kansas City Star* at the time.<sup>60</sup> Keck summarizes the entire relief programme, adorning the eastern, southern, and western façades of the Nelson-Atkins as a 'series of twenty-three panels illustrating the varied trends of migration and important incidents contributing to the settlement of the country around Kansas City'.<sup>61</sup> Contemporary articles from *The Kansas City Star* take a more explicitly jingoistic tone. On Sunday 10 December 1933, for example, the paper described Keck's work as 'an allegory of Civilization's conquest of this section of the West'.<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere in the same edition, the notions of race, progress, and civilization are explicitly connected:

Mr. Keck's decorations in stone depict the march of civilization across this section of the country in its progress East to West. Realistically, the story begins on the east wall, the actors making their entry on the front of the Mary Atkins Museum, where Keck has depicted the coming of the white man. The other walls are similarly treated, the story in stone progressing to its triumphant conclusion and presenting its most dramatic chapter on the beautiful south wall.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> See also Wolferman (n. 20), 122–4, and Churchman and Erbes (n. 20), 129–30.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Keck papers, c.1905–c.1954, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 1, Folder 7, 'Bas-Reliefs: William Rockhill Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, Kansas City, Missouri'; 'In Art Gallery's Stone Walls Historic Scenes are Forming', *The Kansas City Star*, Sunday 24 January 1932, D1. These descriptions are also quoted in Churchman and Erbes (n. 20), Appendix 2.

<sup>61</sup> Keck (n. 60), 1.

<sup>62</sup> 'A Note of Grandeur Pervades Art Gallery's Classics Beauty', *The Kansas City Star*, 10 December 1933, D1. This quotation is identical to language found in the 24 January 1932 edition of the *Star* (n. 60).

<sup>63</sup> 'Art of Sculptor and Painter Adds to Beauty of Nelson Gallery', *The Kansas City Star*, 10 December 1933, 4.



The overall scheme, then, is chronological, moving from the earliest period on the eastern façade, advancing through the southern façade (also further to the west), and finally ending in the western façade, in imitation of settlement's movement from east to west. In Keck's own words, the east group depicts the 'period of exploration c. 1540–1803', beginning on the south side of the building with the 'Spanish Invasion' under De Soto, followed by his death and funeral (Panels 2 and 3 in the south). The first panel on the north side is the 'French Invasion from the North', followed by the explorations of Marquette and LaSalle (Panels 2 and 3 in the north). The central panel depicts the 'Signing of the Louisiana [Purchase] Treaty' of 1803.<sup>64</sup>

Keck labels the southern panels as the 'Pioneer Movement – c. 1812–1860'. Moving from the east side of the building to the west side of the building, in order, the southern group of reliefs includes: 'the first work of penetrating the wilderness' performed by the fur trappers (Panel 1); the Platte Purchase of 1836, overseen by Capt. William Clark, described by Keck as 'a purchase of all the land within the state of Missouri' (Panel 2); a scout (Panel 3); 'the preparation and loading of a wagon train at Westport, near Kansas City' (Panel 4; [Figure 2](#)); the fifth, largest, and central panel, 'depicting a struggle between the pioneers and the Indians for the right of possession', to which we will return in detail ([Figure 3](#)); Panels 6 and 7, which depict, respectively, '[t]he peaceful resumption of the westward march' (Panel 6; [Figure 4](#)) and 'Indians watching the fast growing boat trade' (Panel 7); the pony express (Panel 8); and the '[p]rinting of the first newspaper in Kansas City' (Panel 9).<sup>65</sup>

The western group of reliefs is not labelled with specific dates. However, Keck's title for it, 'The March of Progress', as well as its position to the west, suggest that the images are intended to depict the 'progress' brought by white 'pioneers'. This is certainly true of the first six panels, which include, moving from the south side of the western façade to the north in order, 'a cattle round up' (Panel 1); '[a] school teacher with a group of young children' (Panel 2); '[m]en tilling the fields' (Panel 3); '[a] pioneer Mother' (Panel 4); '[t]he building of the log cabins' (Panel 5); and '[t]he arrival of the first locomotive' (Panel 6). The seventh and final panel alone depicts Native

<sup>64</sup> Keck (n. 60), 1.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.



Figure 2. 'The preparation and loading of a wagon train at Westport, near Kansas City'. Keck, 'Bas-Reliefs' (n. 60), 1. Maquette of Panel 4 of the Keck reliefs on the south side of the Nelson-Atkins Building, plate 5, Ephemera Collection, Record Group 70, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives, Kansas City, Missouri.



Figure 3. 'Fifty foot central panel depicting a struggle between the pioneers and the Indians for the right of possession. A figure of "Fortitude" protects the pioneers'. Keck, 'Bas-Reliefs' (n. 60), 2. Maquette of Panel 5 of the Keck reliefs on the south side of the Nelson-Atkins Building, plate 22, Ephemera Collection, Record Group 70, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives, Kansas City, Missouri.



Figure 4. 'The peaceful resumption of the westward march'. Keck, 'Bas-Reliefs' (n. 60), 2. Maquette of Panel 6 of the Keck reliefs on the south side of the Nelson-Atkins Building, plate 13, Ephemera Collection, Record Group 70, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives, Kansas City, Missouri.

Americans and is described by Keck as '[a] buffalo hunt' (Panel 7). This concluding image seems in reductive terms to evoke the environs of the museum prior to the arrival of whites as a way of closing out the

‘march of progress’ by looking back nostalgically at a Native American presence. The buffalo hunt in Panel 7 is ironically balanced by the cattle roundup in Panel 1.<sup>66</sup>

Keck’s emphasis on the ‘march of progress’ toward white settlement is evident in the processional force of many of the images on the exterior of the Nelson–Atkins. Just as the panels metaphorically ‘progress’ toward ‘civilization’, from the first arrival of the Spanish and the French in the east, through wars with the Natives in the south, and toward the schoolteacher and locomotive in the west, many of the panels utilize the forceful image of the procession to indicate the inexorable force of this westward momentum. Perhaps the most famous precursor to the Keck’s use of the processional motif in his relief sculptures for the Nelson–Atkins is the Parthenon frieze, which was broadly influential during Greek and Roman antiquity, the Italian Renaissance, and in modern England, following the arrival of the Elgin Marbles in London.<sup>67</sup> This vast influence of the Parthenon frieze is significant here, because, as will be discussed below, the central figure and logic in the most important panel of Keck’s relief programme is heavily indebted to the Parthenon, especially its metopes. The visual allusions to the procession of the Parthenon frieze help to establish that Keck is working with the Parthenon in mind, just as Wight speaks of the museum in terms of the same Athenian precursor.

The Parthenon frieze on the exterior of the *cella* walls was the most elaborate depiction of a religious procession from ancient Greece, although its precise subject continues to drive scholarly debate.<sup>68</sup> Despite the ongoing controversy over the meaning of the Parthenon frieze, it is very clearly a celebration of Athens and Athenian society, with depictions and worship of Athenian gods, including the patron Athena, as well as depictions of its heroes and representations of the Athenian populace in general, with images of its men, women, children, and soldiers. Whatever the precise meaning of the religious procession of the frieze, it is triumphalist; it celebrates, to quote Jenifer Neils quoting Cyriacus of Ancona, ‘all the “victories of the Athenians”’.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>67</sup> J. Neils, *The Parthenon Frieze* (Cambridge, 2001), Ch. 7. Churchman and Erbes (n. 20), 129–30, also note the influence of the Parthenon frieze on Keck.

<sup>68</sup> J. Neils, “‘With Noblest Images on All Sides’: The Ionic Frieze of the Parthenon”, in J. Neils (ed.), *The Parthenon. From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 2005), 201.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 220–1, quote from 220.

Keck's programme of reliefs for the Nelson-Atkins is likewise a triumphalist celebration of a locale and (some of) its people, including great figures like Capt. William Clark, De Soto, Marquette, and LaSalle, and even a patron deity, Fortitude. But most of all, again like the Parthenon frieze, the panels seek to construct and celebrate the new civilization envisioned by the artist, with its polity and defining activities and attributes, including fur trapping, scouting of the wilderness, pioneer marches, conflicts with Native populations, steam ships, locomotives, printing presses, cattle roundups, and schoolteachers. Keck's use of the processional theme in his suite of reliefs is fitting because the visual allusion to the Parthenon frieze also suggests a thematic link between the Nelson-Atkins and its triumphalist antecedent.

On the eastern wall, the first panels at the extreme south and north mimic the procession motif of the Parthenon. These depict the Spanish and the French 'invasions' respectively. On the western wall, once again, the first panels on the left and right suggest a processional force, depicting a cattle roundup and a buffalo hunt. In the south, Panels 4 and 6 utilize the processional motif to particular effect (see [Figures 2](#) and [4](#)). These images flank Panel 5 (see [Figure 3](#)), the most important scene of the entire Nelson-Atkins relief programme, which depicts a battle between Natives and whites. The processional scenes to either side situate the battle as part of an inevitable progress toward a civilization perceived as superior. Panel 4 depicts the loading of a wagon in Westport, MO (easy walking distance from the Nelson-Atkins); the crucial Panel 5 in the centre depicts an attack by Native warriors on a wagon; and Panel 6, immediately west of centre, illustrates, '[t]he peaceful resumption of the westward march'.<sup>70</sup> The notion that the peaceful march has only paused for conflict before its inevitable resumption captures the teleological momentum of the reliefs.

Before proceeding to a more in-depth analysis of Keck's sculptures on the south side of the building (see [Figure 1](#)), we should note what is not included here. Although the Nelson-Atkins is within walking distance of a major Civil War battlefield (Battle of Westport [1864]), neither that battle nor the larger Civil War make any appearance in the reliefs. Likewise, none of the violent conflicts of the period of civil strife known as Bleeding Kansas (1854–8) appears on the wall.

<sup>70</sup> Keck (n. 60), 2.

Thus, the crucial conflict of slavery has been totally erased from Keck's story of midwestern foundations.

Despite the erasure of the conflict over slavery and anti-Black racism in general from the Nelson-Atkins friezes, racial conflict is nevertheless at the thematic and literal centre of the programme. By far the largest and most elaborate relief is that in the centre of the southern group (Panel 5). Once again, here is how Keck describes that panel, this time in full: 'Fifty foot central panel depicting a struggle between the pioneers and the Indians for the right of possession. A figure of "Fortitude" protects the pioneers'.<sup>71</sup> In other words, the central event in the largest and most central panel of the entire three-wall suite of friezes depicts violence between Native people and whites. According to the logic of the sculptural programme, it is the 'pioneers' that win this battle. In their conflict for the 'right of possession' of the land around Kansas City, the white newcomers receive the protection of the goddess-like figure of Fortitude, and the 'peaceful resumption of the westward march' (South Group, Panel 6) may continue, along the trail of the larger 'March of Progress' (West Group).

In the central panel of the South Group (Panel 5; see [Figure 3](#)), a tight knot of white 'pioneers' clusters around a prairie schooner (wagon), the bonnet of which is open and viewed from the rear. Hard against either side of the wagon, white settlers armed with long-barrelled guns face outward, away from the open bonnet, shooting or loading weapons. These white 'pioneers' fend off an attack from both sides of the prairie schooner. On a backdrop of trees and underbrush, wagon wheels and barrels, oxen and unmounted horses, eight Native men on horseback attack the wagon. Four mounted men attack from the west, facing east, toward the arrayed defenders. The four mounted men on the eastern side of the wagon appear to be in flight, their horses flying to the east, but their bodies twisted back toward the defenders to the west. Notably, the eastward motion of the Native attack contrasts to the westward motion of the progression of white settlers, against the teleological flow of Keck's narrative of westward settlement. The Native men are portrayed as stereotypically aggressive, dressed in feather headdresses and loincloths.<sup>72</sup> On each side, one attacks

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Panel 5 uses the 'raging warrior' archetype, a common stereotype of Native Americans, related to the 'noble savage' vs. 'wild savage' dichotomy. See N. J. Parezo, 'The Indian Fashion Show: Fighting Cultural Stereotypes with Gender', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 69

with a tomahawk (hatchet), one with a spear, one with a long-barrelled gun, and, most dynamically, one with bow and arrow.

In the midst of the onslaught of mounted attackers, inside the arc of the prairie schooner's open bonnet, is the figure of Fortitude, who resembles the white 'pioneers' surrounding her. She stands, but beside her are two white women, seated beneath her outstretched, sheltering arms, one of whom (on the west) cradles a sleeping infant. Fortitude is the largest figure in the panel, and she is the only one that stands upright. She is not nude, but her form is visible beneath a drape of flowing, windblown fabric. She is strong and imposing. Beneath her long, blowing hair, Fortitude looks with an open eyed, determined stare directly outward from the centre of the panel, straight ahead.

In describing the central figure of his largest panel, Keck states that "Fortitude" protects the pioneers'.<sup>73</sup> Both the allegorical figure herself and the action of protecting are of great importance to the art-historical context of the panel on which Fortitude appears, as well as the broader programme of the larger suite of freezes. Marina Warner has demonstrated that, in Renaissance and later European visual art, feminine representations of allegorized virtues very frequently trace their lineage directly back to Athena or her Roman counterpart, Minerva.<sup>74</sup>

Feminine allegorical depictions of Fortitude specifically are among these virtues that draw on the ancient Greek goddess.<sup>75</sup> Just as Athena in Greek antiquity appeared very frequently armed with a spear, wearing a hoplite helmet and bearing the aegis, so later depictions of Fortitude often share one or more of those attributes.<sup>76</sup> Although Keck's relief of Fortitude is unarmed and has no helmet, her features are large and masculinizing, like Athena, and, as the sculptor himself notes, she takes on one of Athena's primary functions, that of protecting those she favours. Her large, forceful arms extend over the heads of the two seated women beside her, who take shelter under them. Moreover, Fortitude's closed fists seem to brace open the bonnet of the prairie schooner, as if it remained intact by her own force. The arc of the bonnet emanates from behind Fortitude to encircle herself

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(2013), 320–1. See also the podcast associated with the Nelson-Atkins, *A Frame of Mind. Episode 3: First You Have to See It* (n. 33).

<sup>73</sup> Keck (n. 60), 2.

<sup>74</sup> M. Warner, *Monuments and Maidens. The Allegory of the Female Form* (Berkeley, 1985), 87.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, 124, 200.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 6, esp. 124.

and the women (and infant) she protects, suggesting both in its shape and function the aegis or shield characteristic of Athena. Fortitude's closed fists extend to the east and west, in the same direction as the bodies and arms of the 'pioneers' of whom she is the patron. These fists are thus a powerful image of Fortitude's protection of the 'march of progress', embodied for Keck by the white settlers, against the hostility of the Native forces arrayed in supposed opposition to that progress. In the words of the article from the *Star*, these panels depict 'an allegory of Civilization's conquest of this section of the West'.<sup>77</sup>

Athena, depictions of whom are the ultimate source for the allegorical figure of Fortitude, was likewise envisioned as a protector of 'civilization' from barbaric, otherized enemies, mythical and real. Athena's most famous temple was the Parthenon, to which Wight, the architect of the Nelson-Atkins, compared the museum (without claiming it as an architectural model).<sup>78</sup> In evoking this most famous of ancient Greek temples, Keck, as well as Wight, who hired the sculptor and approved his plans, summoned the cultural authority of classical antiquity to buttress a theory of racial superiority, in which white conquest of the west is equated with progress and civilization.

It is especially striking to consider that the enemies of civilization on the Parthenon metopes were drawn from the realm of mythology and legend. Indeed, two of the enemies on the Parthenon metopes are explicitly non-human (giants and centaurs). With the Parthenon sculptures in mind, therefore, the depictions of Native attackers on the south wall of the Nelson-Atkins take on outsized – and extremely reductive – dimensions: this battle assumes the proportions of a mythological conflict, in which the forces of civilization, whiteness, and humanity defeat forces depicted as savage, non-white, and less than human. This refraction of a recent conflict through the lens of mythology also has a parallel in the Parthenon metopes, as the battles between barbarism and civilization there reflect Athenian perceptions of the Greco-Persian Wars.<sup>79</sup>

Keck's visual and verbal characterization of the antagonists in the central panel of the southern suite (Panel 5) clearly situates Native peoples as the aggressors. Whereas in his description of the eastern

<sup>77</sup> *The Kansas City Star* (n. 60). This quotation is identical to language found in the 10 December 1933 edition of the *Star* (n. 62).

<sup>78</sup> Fowler (n. 15).

<sup>79</sup> Kousser (n. 45), 277; Schwab (n. 45), 167; Michaelis (n. 51), 36 §31.



panels, Keck describes the arrival of the Spanish and French to the Midwest as an 'invasion' in both cases, no similar language appears in the descriptions of the American 'pioneers'.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, Keck states that Panel 5 is a 'struggle...for the right of possession', which suggests that the 'pioneers', victorious in the battle on the southern wall, have legitimate grounds to continue the 'peaceful resumption of the westward march'.<sup>81</sup> The images of the relief certainly mirror this rhetoric. The white 'pioneers' are utterly surrounded by their attackers, pressed to the very centre of the panel. They are clustered tight around the prairie schooner and the figure of Fortitude, static in their defensive posture, whereas the Native Americans twist and extend their own bodies toward the middle, and they are mounted on straining, running, lunging, and bucking horses. It is the Native riders that embody active hostility, whereas the white figures protected by Fortitude embody passive defence.

It is especially notable that the battle between the Natives and the pioneers takes place on the southern façade of the Nelson-Atkins because that location invites comparison with the battle of the Lapiths and the centaurs on the southern side of the Parthenon. None of the Natives in the image fights from his feet. In this context, the south side of the building, with an Athena figure in the centre of the panel, evokes the half-horse, half-human centaurs in its stereotyped depiction of Native peoples, with disturbing, dehumanizing implications.

In invoking the Parthenon and its metopes, therefore, Keck and Wight appeal to a most famous classical antecedent to justify and diminish acts of violence by whites in their conflicts with Native peoples in the Midwest. The allusion to the Athenian temple to Athena, goddess of wisdom, cunning, and strategy, serves to rationalize the white incursion into lands held by other peoples in the name of an American ideal of civilization closely tied to white supremacy, and it helps to justify this conquest as legitimate in the face of Native aggression.

### Conclusion

Keck's relief programme on the exterior of the Nelson-Atkins tells a story akin to the cultural triumphalism of the Parthenon metopes: as

<sup>80</sup> Keck (n. 60), 1.

<sup>81</sup> Keck (n. 60), 2.

the Athenian temple celebrates civilized conquest over barbaric disorder, so the Kansas City reliefs celebrate white conquest of Native peoples depicted as aggressive and barbaric. Both structures function as claims to regional power and cultural superiority, and they function as lasting symbols of economic success.

The racist implications of the Nelson-Atkins reliefs are very troubling, especially given the museum's association with racist development practices in Kansas City, the effects of which continue to the present. A few blocks west of the Nelson-Atkins' eventual location on the site of Nelson's former home, J. C. Nichols, the founding trustee of the museum whose dedicatory speech is quoted above, was simultaneously engaged in the development of a major commercial project. Construction on the Country Club Plaza began in 1922, not long before planning for the Nelson-Atkins was underway, by 1927.<sup>82</sup> The Plaza, which was one of the nation's first modern shopping centres,<sup>83</sup> was directly to the north of another Nichols' development, the Country Club District, a sprawling conglomeration of smaller developments, which, like all of Nichols' properties, imposed racial restrictions intended to be permanent.<sup>84</sup> Nichols was a pioneer in the use of such racist covenants, which forbade any owners of the properties in his developments from ever selling to Black people. These restrictions were attached to the land, not to particular owners, and were specifically designed to impose racist segregation for generations to come.<sup>85</sup> Before his death in 1915, William Rockhill Nelson provided important support to Nichols in his creation of these segregated developments,<sup>86</sup> and the museum that bears his name is part of and helped to enforce these exclusionist and racist ideas, both in its economic impact, as an adornment to whites-only developments, and rhetorically, in the racial

<sup>82</sup> R. Pearson and B. Pearson, *The J. C. Nichols Chronicle. The Authorized Story of the Man, His Company, and His Legacy, 1880-1994* (Lawrence, KS, 1994), 92.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> S. Stevens, 'J. C. Nichols and Neighborhood Infrastructure: The Foundations of American Suburbia', in D. Mutti Burke, J. Roe and J. Herron (eds.), *Wide-Open Town. Kansas City in the Pendergast Era* (Lawrence, KS, 2018) 59, 68. See also W. S. Worley, *J. C. Nichols and the Shaping of Kansas City. Innovation in Planned Residential Communities* (Columbia, MO, 1990), 144-55, and C. Stark, 'J. C. Nichols' Whites-only Neighborhoods, Boosted by Star's Founder, Leave Indelible Mark', *The Kansas City Star*, 20 December 2020, <<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article247787885.html>>, accessed 4 June 2023.

<sup>85</sup> K. F. Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development. The Kansas City Experience, 1900-2010* (Albany, 2014), 42-6; Stevens (n. 84) 68-71.

<sup>86</sup> Stark (n. 84). See also K. Hardy, 'The Kansas City Star Removes Name and Image of Its Founder, William Rockhill Nelson', *The Kansas City Star*, 10 January 2021, <<https://www.kansascity.com/article248331765.html>>, accessed 4 June 2023.

narrative of the friezes. The museum, on the former lot of Nelson's home, is in the midst of neighbourhoods designed by Nelson and Nichols to serve the most exclusive populations and, in Nichols' case, to be explicitly and bindingly whites only by covenant: the museum sits in Southmoreland, developed by Nelson; to the east is Rockhill, also developed by Nelson; to the west is the Country Club Plaza, developed by Nichols; to the southwest, across Brush Creek, is the Country Club District, developed by Nichols; and Crestwood, also developed by Nichols, was beyond Kansas City University (now the University of Missouri – Kansas City) to the south.<sup>87</sup> Nichols understood the museum to be embedded within its neighbourhood and physical setting, as he notes in his dedicatory speech for the building:

No city in America claims a more imposing temple of art or a more magnificent setting. Let us not be content until the grounds are extended across the valley, with the reflecting pool linking them to the great university rising on the south. Surrounded by parks, beautiful homes and the Art Institute, supported by this vast people which instinctively loves the natural beauty of the [w]est and unfailingly responds to those movements which seek to benefit mankind, there is no limit to the growth, influence and universal benefit of this exhibition.<sup>88</sup>

Only a few blocks to the west of the Nelson-Atkins, also along the banks of Brush Creek, the Plaza refashioned a previously rural, midwestern landscape in European guise. Just as stories of Atkins' and Nelson's travel to Europe are framed as inspiring their bequests to found an art museum, so J. C. Nichols was inspired by European travel, paying close attention to architecture and city planning. As one account puts it, '[t]he seeds for the idea of the Country Club Plaza had been planted during Nichols' European trips'.<sup>89</sup> Nichols took a particular interest in Spanish architecture, and the Plaza was designed in a Spanish colonial style.<sup>90</sup> One of the Plaza's best-known landmarks, the Giralda Tower, is a half-sized reproduction of the bell tower of the same name in the Cathedral of Seville. Although this tower was not dedicated until 1967, Nichols had visited the landmark in Seville during his travels,

<sup>87</sup> On the exclusivity of Nelson's developments, see J. R. Shortridge, *Kansas City and How it Grew, 1822–2011* (Lawrence, KS, 2012), 79–80. On the literal and metaphorical interconnectedness of these developments, see Worley (n. 84), 63–8. See also Stevens (n. 84) 59–61.

<sup>88</sup> Nichols (n. 19), 4.

<sup>89</sup> Pearson and Pearson (n. 82), 92.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 93, with quote of R. Longstreth, 'J. C. Nichols, the Country Club Plaza, and Notions of Modernity', *Harvard Architecture Review* 5 (1986), 120–35.

and he had drawn up plans to incorporate it into one of the buildings on the Plaza.<sup>91</sup>

Originally the minaret for the Moorish mosque of Seville, upon being seized by the Spanish Catholics, this tower was later topped with a classicizing weathervane: a Christian reimagining of Athena/Minerva in the guise of Faith.<sup>92</sup> A replica of this Faith in Seville sits atop the Giralda Tower on the Plaza in Kansas City.<sup>93</sup> Although the Kansas City Faith was not yet present at the opening of the Nelson-Atkins Museum, its symbolic value is rich: just as Nichols intended, it unifies commercial and cultural spheres, in a complex Europeanizing and classicizing way. Over an outdoor shopping mall, atop a half-sized replica of a European original, stands a copy of a Spanish imitation of a Roman imitation of the patron of Athens.

The construction of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, on a hill just a few blocks to the east of the Plaza, would provide a Kansas City Parthenon to balance the Plaza's *agora*. Like Pericles, 2,400 years before and half a world away, the bas-reliefs of the Nelson-Atkins would invoke Athenian claims of cultural superiority, but now to bolster white, Euro-American claims of supremacy, to add an aesthetic ornament to the sprawling, whites-only developments of upper-crust Kansas City.

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<sup>91</sup> Pearson and Pearson (n. 82), 215.

<sup>92</sup> M. J. Sanz, 'El Giraldillo, La Mujer Guerrera, y Su Relación con La Pequeña Escultura', *Laboratorio de Arte* 20 (2007), 111–20.

<sup>93</sup> M. Dodd, *Kansas City Then and Now II* (Kansas City, MO, 2003), 228.