The Temple of Hephaistos:
Innovations in Art and Architecture
by
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The Temple of Hephaistos has provided scholars valuable insight into stylistic innovations of 5th century Athens, as well as heated debates concerning almost every aspect of the building. This is because the Hephaisteion is both the best preserved Doric temple in all of Greece, as well as an oddly idiosyncratic structure. Because its foundations were laid c. 450 B.C., the Hephaisteion holds a unique place in history, straddling the early and high classical periods. Although construction began around this pivotal date, the temple was not completed until between 421-415 B.C. Thus, the temple has provided a multitude of insights into the stylistic evolutions during one of the most influential periods of Art History. By recounting briefly what is known about the Hephaisteion, and providing a descriptive overview of the structure, I will highlight some of the sculptural and architectural innovations of the Hephaisteion in relation to the stylistic developments of the early and high classical period.

The Temple of Hephaistos is located on the Kolonos Agoraios, a hill overlooking the Athenian Agora. For years, scholars named the temple after the favored Athenian hero Theseus, in part due to the numerous depictions of him within the temple’s reliefs. This identification has been largely discredited for several reasons. Firstly, another Theseum was discovered making it less likely that this temple is also dedicated to Theseus. Furthermore, the temple is surrounded by metalworking and pottery sites, making a temple to Hephaistos highly appropriate. Pausanias describes a Hephaisteion in his accounts of the Agora, thus acknowledging the existence of such a temple.¹

¹ Anderson and Spiers, 1978, 126
Therefore, the current consensus is that the temple was dedicated to Hephaistos. The temple would have featured both him and Athena, who in this context served as the goddess of pottery/craft.

The Hephaisteion’s well-preserved condition is largely due to the Byzantines who converted it into a Christian church many centuries later. Upon conversion, the temple was transformed into a Christian burial site, and a great number of tombs were dug into its structure. The Hephaisteion is also unique in that a cultivated garden was found surrounding the building. This is the first example archaeologists have of a cultivated garden around a temple. It was most likely constructed during the Hellenistic Era in the 3rd Century B.C.

Most scholars agree the temple’s foundations were laid circa 449 B.C., although there is debate. Some date it as early as 460 B.C. Evidence suggests the site held no previous temple before the Hephaisteion. There are very few reused blocks, and no plan can be found for a previous structure. The temple is the first to be made completely of marble, except the roof of the cela, which was wood, and the lowest step of the stylobate, which is poros. The other steps of the stylobate along with the majority of the building

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2 Generally speaking, the only prominent scholar not in agreement with the temple’s attribution to Hephaistos is Evelyn Harrison. She argues in her article, “Alkamenes’ Sculptures for the Hephaisteion: Part I, the Cult Statues,” (1977) that the replicas of the cult statues in existence today would not physically fit inside the temple. In addition, Erling C. Olsen (1938) comments in the article, “An Interpretation of the Hephaisteion Reliefs,” that the sculptural themes of the building do not match the temple’s attribution to Hephaistos, and that the Greeks would not have put sculpture on the temple unrelated to the god. This topic will be discussed later on in my paper.

3 Travlos, 1980, 261

4 Travlos, 1980, 261

5 Dinsmoor, 1941
are of Pentelic marble, while most of the sculptures and decoration are made of Parian marble.

The Temple of Hephaistos is a standard Doric structure in the majority of its features, although the Athenians’ increasing affinity for Ionic embellishments is also prevalent. The Doric order was predominant on the mainland of present day Greece as well as with the Greeks of Western Sicily. The essential elements of this style were in place by the middle of the 6th century. Doric columns are fluted columns with simple capitals and no bases. They taper slightly inwards as they go up and feature subtle entasis. Columns in the Doric order are generally more stout and sturdy than those of the Ionic order. While the Hephaisteion’s columns are of a conventionally Doric style, they are also noticeably more slender than those of its predecessors.

The increasing use of Ionic elements in Doric temples is a stylistic trend found in the Hephaisteion, which the slender columns are an example of. While the newly slender columns are meant to heighten the temple’s elegance, the altered proportions were not balanced with the size of the entablature, creating less visually appealing proportions.\(^6\) The Parthenon’s architect perfected this by creating a greater number of columns to disperse the weight of the entablature. The Parthenon is an octastyle structure while the Hephaisteion is hexastyle. Hexastyle is the standard convention for Doric order temples. Other characteristics of the classic Doric style include a low entablature, a pitched roof with cornices, and the use of pediments with or without sculpture. In the case of the Hephaisteion, both pediments had sculpture. The temple is fairly small with a standard Doric plan and a peristyle. The inner columns are amphidistyle in antis. Being

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6 Lawrence, 1957, 176
hexastyle, the temple follows the aesthetic guidelines for \( n \) columns along the front, and \( 2n+1 \) columns along the sides.

The Hephaisteion has a cella, pronaos, and opisthodomos. Curiously, the pronaos is significantly longer than the opisthodomos. The pronaos is 3 bays deep while the opisthodomos is 1.5 bays deep. The foundations prove difficult to study because the architect altered them at some point during construction.\(^7\) Alterations included an extension of the cella, which could possibly account for the shortened opisthodomos. It is also possible that styles evolved to place greater emphasis on temple entrances, and previous notions of symmetry were being played with. This could be the case in the Hephaisteion where the architect is compromising between traditional Doric standards, and innovations in design plan. Specific innovations in design will be further discussed when addressing the Ionic friezes inside the temple.

Although the building has shifted some over the years, the Hephaisteion appears to follow the general Doric standards for proportion.\(^8\) Some of its stranger features could be attributed to optical adjustments intended for people viewing the temple from below the hill.\(^9\) This includes the increased distance between the peristyle and the pronaos. If the distance between the two were shorter, the appearance from the agora would be less favorable.

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\(^7\) Martin, 2003, 93  
\(^8\) Lawrence, 1957, 176  
\(^9\) Lawrence, 1957, 176
The temple contains a Doric metope/triglyph frieze that runs its entire perimeter. There are a total of 68 metopes, 18 of which have sculpture. The sculptured metopes are located along the East entrance of the temple, and along the North and South flanks adjacent to the East. They number ten across the East, and four along each side. The triglyphs are located on top of each column, with another triglyph in each intercolumniation. Both the East and the West pediments had sculpture, and the East had akroteria. Little is left of the pedimental sculpture. It was long thought that the West Pediment had no sculpture at all, although it is now generally held that it did. All of the sculptured friezes along the outside of the temple are especially catered to the East end, which is both the entrance and the side seen from the Agora. Once again, the architect appears to be placing extra emphasis on the temple’s entrance than was done in early Doric temples.

The sculptural subjects have also been debated since much of the figures have endured severe weathering. Today there is a consensus on the subject of the sculptured metopes, as well as the inner Ionic friezes. Of the eighteen sculptured metopes, the ten across the East depict triumphs of Herakles. The North and South sides each contain four sculptured metopes that are adjacent to the East end. Together they comprise eight metopes depicting triumphs of Theseus. The ten metopes dedicated to Herakles, present nine of his labors, with one scene taking up two panels. The labors shown are the Lion, Hydra, Hind, Boar, Horse, Kerberos, Amazon, Geryon (two panels), and the Hesperides. The last metope with the Hesperides provides an appropriate segue into the subject of the East pediment, which is the apotheosis of Herakles. Of the East pedimental

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10 Thompson, 1962
11 Thompson, 1962
sculpture, only three fragmentary torsos remain: one of Herakles, one of Athena, and the third of a reclining male spectator. The East pediment also had akroteria, which appears to have been the three Hesperides themselves. Only one figure from the akroteria remains. The 8 metopes of Theseus are divided between the North and the South, with each side containing 4 sculptured metopes. On the North side is his journey from Troizen to Athens, where he destroyed the Sow, Skiron, Kerkyon, and Prokrustes. On the South side is his defeat of Periphetes, Sinis, the Marathonian Bull, and the Minotaur.

A curious feature regarding the aforementioned metopes is the extension of one of Herakles’ triumphs to two panels. While this has been done in other temples, a building so scrupulously planned as the Hephaisteion would only have such a feature if it served a purpose. Homer A. Thompson (1962) argues in his article, “The Sculptural Adornment of the Hephaisteion,” that there could be a concern to honor both Herakles and Theseus equally, as was done in the Treasury of Delphi. At Delphi, both Theseus and Herakles were each given a long and a short side of the building in sculpture. In the Hephaisteion, by spreading out one of Herakles’ triumphs to two panels, both he and Theseus are featured in nine events on the East end. Namely, the eight sculptured metopes of Theseus on the North and South in addition to his presence in the frieze over the pronaos, and the nine triumphs of Herakles featured on the East end. This would explain why Herakles is given ten metopes that only depict nine events. To extend this idea of balance, Herakles is given the sculpture of the East Pediment, while Theseus is featured in the West. One fact that contradicts Thompson’s argument is that Theseus is featured in both continuous friezes over the pronaos and opisthodomos. Could this possibly be the Athenians boasting their hero above all others?

12 Thompson, 1962
The Hephaisteion has significantly more sculptural decoration than its standard Doric predecessors. The sculpture continues inside the temple with two continuous Ionic friezes as well as the main focus of the temple, the cult figures. As stated, the continuous friezes inside the temple are located above the pronaos and above the opisthodomos. Both friezes have standard Ionic molding. The frieze above the pronaos shows two groups of warriors fighting each other in the presence of two groups of gods. One group consists of lightly armored warriors, while the other group wears no clothes at all. The unclothed group fights with boulders. This is enough information to determine the scene is a battle between Theseus and giants.\textsuperscript{13} Theseus had an uncle named Pallas, who was his rival for power in Athens. Sophokles described Pallas’ sons as "harsh and rearer of giants", thus explaining the presence of giants in the fight between Theseus and his uncle. Of the two groups of gods, each group has three members. Those on the left have commonly been identified as Athena, Zeus, and Hera, due to their clothing and other signifiers. The group on the right is more difficult to identify. They are possibly Poseidon, Amphitrite, and Hephaistos.\textsuperscript{14} If this is the case, one group contains Athena and the other contains Hephaistos, creating an appropriate entrance into the temple where their two cult statues await. Furthermore, the inclusion of Hephaistos in one of the friezes containing Theseus, ties two of the temple's subjects together. The subject of the frieze over the opisthodomos is highly recognizable as being a battle between Lapiths and Centaurs. Although it was long held that the West pediment had no sculpture at all, recent consensus states that the pediment depicted a scene of the battle between Lapiths and Centaurs as well.

\textsuperscript{13} Thompson, 1962
\textsuperscript{14} Thompson, 1962
One of the most interesting and innovative aspects of the entire temple is the extension of the frieze over the pronaos to the outer peristyle. While the frieze over the opisthodomos is limited to the width of the cella, that over the pronaos extends on both sides to the outer colonnade. Three other temples constructed after the Hephaisteion also featured an extended frieze over the pronaos, without one over the opisthodomos. Because of this, these three other temples have been attributed to the Hephaisteion architect. The other temples include the Poseidon at Sounion, Ares at Acharnai, and Nemesis at Rhamnous. The architect is unknown, but these three temples share many design characteristics that are unique from other buildings, and are thus considered innovations by the Hephaisteion architect.

The function of the extended frieze over the pronaos is best understood by viewing an aerial elevation of the temple. When doing so, it becomes clear that the architect was defining a space at the entrance of the temple, similar to a front porch. The compartment is outlined by the ten sculptured metopes of Herakles, the four on each side of Theseus, and the continuous frieze over the pronaos. When viewed aerially, these four elements create a rectangle, or compartment, outlined by sculptured friezes. This architectural innovation is deliberately repeated after the Hephaisteion, implying that it served its appropriate function in the eyes of the architect. This innovation means that the architect was rethinking the use of space in temples, as well as emphasizing the entrance of the temple. The move towards compartmentalizing space in temples is a trend that will continue into the high classical period.

The creation of a compartment in the front entrance is emphasized by another architectural innovation not seen before the Hephaisteion. In the Hephaisteion, and the

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15 Lethaby, 1908, 148
three subsequent temples attributed to its architect, the columns in antis are aligned with the third columns on the North and South flanks, adjacent to the East end. By aligning these columns, the architect created a compartment both with sculpture and with the architectural plan. The column alignment is not featured in the back porch, pointing to the conscious creation of space in the temple entrance. Not only does the architect create a new entry space, he also unifies the outer colonnade with the inner temple structure.

Dinsmoor proposes an order for the temples constructed by the Hephaisteion architect, with the Hephaisteion being chronologically first.\textsuperscript{16} This allows implications to be drawn concerning stylistic evolution. The Temple of Poseidon at Sounion has an extended frieze over the pronaos as well, but the frieze over the opisthodomos is completely eliminated. As mentioned, all three subsequent temples have an alignment between columns in the peristyle and the columns in antis. Thus, the architect determined the front compartment as being a successful stylistic evolution, while the enclosure of the back porch was deemed unnecessary. As style evolved, the Hephaisteion architect developed new ways to further emphasize the entry space. In the temple of Ares at Acharnai, the sculptural metopes on the outside of the temple are eliminated, and instead the sculpture begins focusing inward, towards the portico. Thus, people inside the temple can visibly see the architectural compartment as well as the sculptural compartment.

Inside the temple were two bronze cult statues depicting Athena and Hephaistos. While the statues themselves are gone, we have some evidence of them. Literature states that the sculptures were created by Alkamenes and were highly praised in their time. Although Hephaistos’ lameness was an undesirable subject matter for the Greeks, he was

\textsuperscript{16} Lawrence, 1957, 179
said to have been depicted in a regal, elegant manner.\textsuperscript{17} In addition, about 10m southwest of the temple a pit was found containing evidence of bronze casting. In the pit was a fragment with an inscription describing a pair of bronze statues made for the Hephaisteion with the names of the overseers recorded.\textsuperscript{18} The fragment was dated between 421-415 B.C., almost forty years after the original foundations were laid.

Such a discrepancy between the beginning and completion of construction is noteworthy. There are many possible reasons including lack of financial resources, or the onset of war. One that seems incredibly likely is that the Hephaisteion’s workers were transferred to the Parthenon, whose construction began c. 447 B.C. and ended c. 432 B.C. This would account for the fact that the Hephaisteion’s construction began before the Parthenon, and yet it was not completed until after the Parthenon.\textsuperscript{19} If the Hephaisteion’s workers took a hiatus to work on the Parthenon, it is possible that they brought back some of the Parthenon’s innovations with them.

This is the common argument behind the belief that the Hephaisteion had an interior colonnade. The colonnade is debated, although most scholars currently believe it existed. Evidence is hard to find because the Christians badly damaged the cella floor by digging tombs. The colonnade would have formed a U-shape around the cult statues, framing them from behind.\textsuperscript{20} This format was an

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Temple of Hephaisteion, Cult Images (\textcopyright P. Reeves and J. Travlos)}
\end{figure}

\begin{table}[h]
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\textbf{Year} & \textbf{Event} \\
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2003 & Martin, 93 \\
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1962 & Thompson, 96 \\
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1980 & Travlos, 261 \\
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\textsuperscript{17} Travlos, 1980, 261
\textsuperscript{18} Thompson, 1962
\textsuperscript{19} It is also likely that construction ended before 420 B.C., but the sculptural adornment was the last feature of the temple to be finished.
\textsuperscript{20} Martin, 2003, 93
innovation created in the Parthenon. It is known that the foundations were changed at some point during construction. According to this theory, they were changed sometime during or after the Parthenon’s construction, presuming that the Hephaisteion architect was influenced by the Parthenon’s innovations. The cella walls of the Hephaisteion appear to have been prepared for monumental fresco paintings. They have a strange, rough texture throughout, yet no frescoes were painted.\textsuperscript{21} If an interior colonnade was added, the columns would have been far too close to the cella walls to view a fresco, supporting the idea that a colonnade was added as an afterthought influenced by the Parthenon.\textsuperscript{22}

Homer A. Thompson argues that the Parthenon influenced the Hephaisteion in many ways, including theme.\textsuperscript{23} Thompson proposes that there was a relationship between the theme of the Parthenon and that of the Hephaisteion. The Parthenon is a celebration of Athena, and the gods of the Athenians. Thompson states that the Hephaisteion, being the lesser temple, could very well have been a celebration of the Athenian people, rather than gods. The heroes, Herakles and Theseus, featured in the reliefs are themselves people, not gods. If there is merit to this proposal, it brings a whole new light to the role of Hephaistos as well as establishing a relationship between him and the subjects of the temple’s friezes.

To elaborate on this, the cult statues must be reconsidered. The statues stood on a pedestal containing a high relief of the birth of Erichthonios. The birth of Erichthonios is essentially the story of the birth of the Athenian people. Furthermore, Hephaistos is viewed as their father, which creates new implications for his thematic role in the

\textsuperscript{21} Thompson, 1962
\textsuperscript{22} Thompson, 1962
\textsuperscript{23} Thompson, 1962
Hephaisteion. Firstly, it means that his role was far more symbolic than a simple tribute to the god of metalworking. Rather his presence represents a celebration of being Athenian. The presence of a bronze statue of Athena next to Hephaistos emphasizes Athenian pride as well. Furthermore, such an interpretation would validate a greater thematic relationship between the Hephaisteion and the Parthenon.

Therefore, the implications of Thompson’s idea create a broad theme that also unites the multiple subjects within the various sculptural decorations. Erling C. Olsen (1938) argues against the temple’s attribution to Hephaistos, citing the lack of connection between sculptural decoration. He states that the Greeks would not have included various subjects in the sculpture that were unrelated to the temple’s deity. But, by allowing Thompson’s thematic proposal, a harmony of sculptural decoration is achieved. Herakles, Theseus, Hephaistos, and Athena, all adequately represent pride in being an Athenian person. Herakles represents the hero of Greece, while Theseus is the adored Athenian hero. By comparing Theseus with Herakles, the sculptor boasts Athenian pride. Hephaistos is the father of the Athenian people, told in the birth of Erichthonios, and Athena stands by his side as the patron goddess of Athens. Athena and Hephaistos are also featured together again in the frieze above the pronaos. They watch Theseus’ celebrated victory over the giants. In addition, Theseus’ dramatic battle with his uncle is the forerunner to the establishment of the Panathenaic festival, which is featured in the corresponding frieze of the Parthenon. When seen in relation to Thompson’s thematic suggestion, the sculptural adornment of the Hephaisteion is unified.

The thematic relationship between the Parthenon and the Hephaisteion is plausible. Furthermore, it is established that the foundations of the Hephaisteion were
changed in order to reflect stylistic developments of the Parthenon. It is possible that the best way to view the Hephaisteion is as a stepping-stone towards the refinements of the Parthenon. It manifests the transitions of styles from the early classical towards the high classical of the Parthenon. The architect was playing with the new styles and working towards their perfection. The same attributes that the architects of the Hephaisteion may have considered, were refined and perfected in the Parthenon. The Hephaisteion's constructions were laid at the end of the early classical period, but its actual completion was not until three to four decades later, in the midst of the high classical period. It is evident that the architect attempted to adjust the building in order to fit new stylistic developments, but they could not completely erase the earlier styles inherent in the building’s original design. The creation of a new form of entrance space through the extended frieze over the pronaos and the alignment of columns, is a true innovation of the Hephaisteion. It provides evidence for how styles were evolving, and the motivations and aesthetic tastes of the Athenians. The Hephaisteion also features an increase in Ionic embellishments, which will a hallmark of architectural stylistic changes in the decades to come.
Bibliography


