

“Now Art Comes”: The Parthenon and Racial Conquest in Kansas City

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri has always been and remains a self-conscious symbol and measure of the cultural and economic value of Kansas City and its region, just as (*si parva licet componere magnis*) the Parthenon and other buildings of the Acropolis were and continue to be for Athens. 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 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. (<https://www.nelson-atkins.org/about/>)

J. C. Nichols, an important national figure in the history of real estate development and one of the three founding trustees of the Nelson-Atkins, delivered the dedicatory speech at its opening ceremonies on December 11, 1933. Nichols links racial conquest and culture, implying the ‘civilizing’ influence of an art museum as the next stage in the subjugation of the West by white settlers: “The generations just behind conquered a wilderness of prairie and of plain. Now art comes” (Nichols, “Dedicatory Talk”). The Kansas City developer envisions the museum as a mark of transition from conquest to cultural development.

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 as forces for commercial, civic, and cultural development in Kansas City, invoking Europe and the classical world to do so. Most importantly, the museum itself, including its neoclassical structure and the program 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 the 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 (on whom see <https://nelson-atkins.org/about/land-acknowledgment/>), 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 honored at the Parthenon.

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