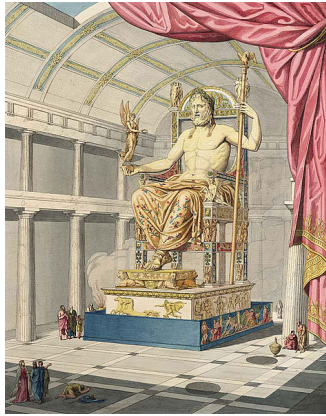




Pheidias, the Greek sculptor who created the statue of Zeus at Olympia—one of the seven wonders of the ancient world—was no stranger to creating spectacular works of art. He also created the massive statue of Athena Parthenos, now lost, at the Parthenon in Athens.

Legends, passed down throughout history, tell us about Pheidias' creative inspiration for his great statue of Zeus. He reportedly looked to the *Iliad* for a sense of how the chief Greek god appeared.

What passage, from the *Iliad*, may have inspired the sculptor? These words, from Book One, of Homer's still-studied work:

*He spoke, the son of Kronos, and nodded his head with the dark brows,
and the immortally anointed hair of the great god
swept from his divine head, and all Olympos was shaken.*

(See *Iliad*, Book One, [lines 528 – 530](#))

How does this passage, from the *Iliad*, look in Greek?

ἀ¼| καά½¶ κυανῖάεισιν ἀ¼π' ἀ½¶φρῖσι νεάεισε Κρονῖων

ἀ¼μβρῖσιαι δ' ἀ¼ρα χαάειται ἀ¼περρῖσαντο ἀ¼νακτος

κρατά½,ς ἀ¼π' ἀ¼θανῖτοιο μῖγαν δ' ἀ¼λῖλιξεν ἀ½λυμπον.

Historians believe that Pheidias created this massive statue, at his studio at Olympia, around the middle of the fifth century, B.C. No copy survives (if any were ever made).

The great statue was still-standing in the 1st century, BC, when Strabo passed through the area. In his *Geography*, Strabo describes the massive size of the seated Zeus. He had the impression that if the statue were able to stand, its head would go through the roof of the temple, in Olympia, where it was on display:

...thus making the impression that if Zeus arose and stood erect he would unroof the temple. (See [Geography at VIII.3.30.](#))

We have a more-detailed description from Pausanias, another ancient writer, who recorded his observations in the first century A.D. He describes the 40-foot-high representation of Zeus with these words:

The god sits on a throne, and he is made of gold and ivory. On his head lies a garland which is a copy of olive shoots. In his right hand he carries a Victory, which, like the statue, is of ivory and gold; she wears a ribbon and—on her head—a garland.

In the left hand of the god is a scepter, ornamented with every kind of metal, and the bird sitting on the scepter is the eagle. The sandals also of the god are of gold, as is likewise his robe. On the robe are embroidered figures of animals and the flowers of the lily.

The throne is adorned with gold and with jewels, to say nothing of ebony and ivory. Upon it are painted figures and wrought images. There are four Victories, represented as dancing women, one at each foot of the throne, and two others at the base of each foot....On the uppermost parts of the throne Pheidias has made, above the head of the image, three Graces on one side and three Seasons on the other.... I know that the height and breadth of the Olympic Zeus have been measured and recorded; but I shall not praise those who made the measurements, for even their records fall far short of the impression made by a sight of the image. (See [Pausanias, Description of Greece: V.11.1-2, 7, 9.](#))

Pausanias records a legend about how people responded to Pheidias' astonishing statue. The most-interesting response came from Zeus himself:

I know that the height and breadth of the Olympic Zeus have been measured and recorded; but I shall not praise those who made the measurements, for even their records fall far short of the impression made by a sight of the image. Nay, the god himself according to legend bore witness to the artistic skill of Pheidias. For when the image was quite finished Pheidias prayed the god to show by a sign whether the work was to his liking. Immediately, runs the legend, a thunderbolt fell on that part of the floor where down to the present day the bronze jar stood to cover the place... (See Pausanias, 5.11.9.)

We do not know how—or when—the statue's life ended, although earthquakes and fires have damaged or destroyed other priceless antiquities in Olympia. The statue could have been in trouble during the late-second century, A.D., according to this part of a story by the satirist Lucian of Samosata (a writer whom Shakespeare admired):

...they have laid hands on your person at Olympia, my lord High-Thunderer, and you had not the energy to wake the dogs or call in the neighbours; surely they might have come to the rescue and caught the fellows before they had finished packing up the swag [loot]... (See *Works of Lucian of Samosata, Complete Four Volumes*, at [page 64](#) of a version online via Google Books.)

Quatremère de Quincy (1755-1849) created this artist's impression, of the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, during 1815. Click on it for a better view.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Statue-of-Zeus-Wonder-of-the-Ancient-World>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Statue-of-Zeus-Wonder-of-the-Ancient-World>