

## Blog 1 - British Museum exhibition review – ABINGDON Classics Dpt End of Term Departmental Jolly!

### **Luxury and Power: Persia to Greece**

The Western portrayal of the East as exotic (and therefore decadent and easily defeated) has a long history, stretching back to Aeschylus' *Persians*; the well-designed exhibition at the BM makes clever use of (mainly) its own Greek and Persian collections to blur the East/West boundaries in terms of desire for luxury and the use of it to project power. Since this exhibition is about challenging past narratives, it is fitting that the way it is itself arranged sets a strong narrative; the room is divided into three, each division a theme (Persian luxury, Athenian democracy, Alexander and the Hellenistic kingdoms); the two liminal spaces between feature brief video accounts of the key military interactions between Persia and Greece: The Persian invasions and Alexander's conquest of Persia. Both of these conflicts were represented in Greek sources as the victory of hardy Greeks over Persians corrupted by luxury, with the added peril of those Greeks (like Alexander) turning soft as a result of the encounter.



Many of the items in the exhibition are owned by the British Museum; some were like old friends in a different context, while others made me wonder why I hadn't seen them before they were so beautiful and interesting. It astounded me afresh what an incredible collection the BM has that it could single-handedly resource an exhibition of such verve. Of the exhibits from elsewhere, the Panagyurishte treasure is breath-taking in its beauty, and with a backstory that could make it a future mystical artefact in an Indiana Jones film. Since you would have to go to Bulgaria to see this normally, it is much more convenient and cheaper to see it in this exhibition. The gold rhytons

also make a fitting climax to the narrative of the exhibition, since they fuse Persian luxury dining culture (as illustrated in the first of the rooms) with Greek culture, since the rhytons depict various Greek myths; their provenance is uncertain, but they date from the Hellenistic period in Thrace where the fusion of East and West reached its apogee in the courts of the Hellenistic princes. The details were delightful: a head popping out from behind the one of the seven gates of Thebes in a depiction of the Seven against Thebes, or the carefully incised names of the goddesses at the judgement of Paris (the commentary suggesting this as evidence for a Thracian court



not entirely au fait with the Greek myths! This was enlivened by the observation that the amphora-rhyton had two spouts to allow the host and visiting chief to share the same wine and prevent suspicions of poison).



I was particularly struck by the use of artefacts to demonstrate the Athenian preoccupation with luxury despite harping on about how democracy eschewed such inequality. I discovered Persian luxury entering Athenian culture under the radar, including 'Athenian' rhytons, pots designed to mimic the Persian gold and silver designs of the Persians and even a fascinating attitude towards the ultimate Persian luxury animal, the peacock: apparently one Athenian aristocrat combined luxury with democratic sentiments by putting his birds of public display for one day a month. The suggestion was that though the Athenians liked to portray the Persians as trouser wearing softies, they very much aspired to adopt their lifestyles.



There are too many lovely items and details to record here, but one of my favourites were in the room dedicated to Alexander and the 'Orientalisation' of both Alexander and later Macedonian rulers of Persia. Adopting Persian luxury was a key way to secure power for Alexander and his successors, even if Greek historians of the time thought that he was selling out. There was a lovely Babylonian cuneiform tablet recording the important day of Alexander's death with the Michael Fish-esque line: 'It was cloudy'. So much of the final room on Alexander picked up the first room on Persian



luxury: a portrayal of Alexander as pharaoh, to match with the one of Darius I as pharaoh – the message was clear: Alexander the Greek was also the last Achaemenid, using exactly the same sort of power-plays.

## Blog 2 - James Heath: Hunting the Classical in Stockholm

Upon learning last year that I was invited to a wedding of a family friend in Sweden this July, and knowing that I'd have to spend some time in Stockholm, I had immediately taken a look for traces of the Classics. My search returned the information that there was a Mediterranean Museum (Medelhavsmuseet) as well as some pieces existing within the Royal Palace's collection at Gustav III's Antikmuseum. Having been north of Uppsala for the Thursday to Sunday morning part of our trip, it meant having to leave my partner in our Stockholm hotel's spa (something she was not bothered by at all) and head into Stockholm that afternoon to view the collection of the Medelhavsmuseet, as it was going to be closed on the Monday and we were flying back to the UK on Tuesday morning. Meanwhile we were planning on visiting the Royal Palace on the Monday anyway, so I would see those pieces in good time anyway.



Figure 1: Interior of the Museum

Having figured out the Stockholm metro system, made the roughly 7 minute walk from T-Centralen station to the Medelhavsmuseet, and paid the entry fee (as a head's up, Stockholm is predominantly cash-free city), I entered into the museum. Set into a what I believe is a 17<sup>th</sup> century palace, the central court of the museum is strikingly modern, all angles and glass (see Fig.1).



Figure 2: The Lion and Bull Decoration

air sanctuary at Ayia Irini (Fig.3). The excavations in 1929 by Erik Sjöqvist unearthed nearly 2000 terracotta figures, half of which are on display in the museum, the other half are in the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia. All the figures were discovered facing an altar and cultic stone.

In all these central glass cabinets are the Cypriot collection. Annoyingly hard to photograph because of said glass. They were mainly finds from temples in Cyprus, with one of my highlights being an attachment with relief decoration of two antithetic lions attacking a bull (Fig.2). It dates to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and comes from Vouni. The largest glass case was reserved for the finds from the open



Figure 3: The Case of Finds from Ayia Irini



Having worked my way round to the Gold room I popped my head in to see the range of



Figure 4: The Cameo Rings

jewellery from Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Italy, and Byzantium. Mainly focusing on the Roman pieces, because I'm me. These included cameo rings with depictions of Hermes and a man thought to be Alexander the Great (Fig.4).

Next time period was the small Greek and Etruscan section. This part of the collection was predominantly vases and other



Figure 5: One of the Pottery Pieces

pottery (Fig.5), though did have one Etruscan cinerary urn (Fig.6), one urn lid, a mosaic from Roman Syria, and a fresco fragment from Pompeii (Fig.7). There were also a bust of Dionysus and a statue of Artemis, but these were both Roman period.



Figure 7: Fresco Fragment from Pompeii



Figure 6: Etruscan Urn

This brings us nicely into the also fairly small (though larger than the Greek and Etruscan) Roman collection. Made up of a combination of busts/portraits, reliefs, and some inscriptions on altars/grave markers, the collection does have some nice variety to it. The highlight was probably the funerary relief of Titus Aelius Evangelus (Fig.8), probably from Ostia. Followed by two dedications to Hadrian, the bust of emperor Titus (Fig.9), and an inscription fragment dedicated to Herodes Atticus. There were plenty of other portraits, a few other



Figure 8: The Funerary Relief



Figure 9: The Bust of Titus

funerary and dedicatory inscriptions, and a nice relief of upper-class ladies entering a city. The Roman collection also includes a sarcophagus, the previously mentioned statue of Artemis and bust of Dionysus, and a head of Vitellius in the Grimani style, but not thought to be the emperor.



Figure 10: Statuettes of the Egyptian Gods

The largest part of the museum, next to the Cypriot section, was their Egyptian collection. Starting out with a piece on the stone age settlements, dating back to 5000 BC, there was pottery and stone tool-heads on display from places like Faiyum and Mostagedda. This section culminated with a tomb from the First Dynasty period. Then it moves forward in a linear style covering lots of aspects of Daily Life, as well as key topics, themes and figures. There are sections on the gods (Fig.10), Sketches from the Valley of the Kings. Cabinets hold pieces to do with craftsmanship, women's work, men's work, the Role of the King, Baskets and Brooms, piety in Deir el-Medina, the Amarna period, and the cultural encounters brought on by the Ptolemaic dynasty. Lots

of the stele, and hieroglyphic inscriptions featuring deities and pharaohs still retained some of their polychromatic features. Several of the pharaohs are represented in physical form, like Hatshepsut and Thutmose I. The Egyptian period ended with a descent to the basement

level to see items connected to burial; Faiyum Portraits (Fig.11), mummified animals, and grave goods from Egyptian Tombs.



Figure 11: Faiyum Portraits and other Masks



Figure 12: Oil-Lamps from Various Periods

The last section of the museum was upstairs where there were several glass cabinets, with pieces from throughout the ancient world on display in glass cabinets.

Each cabinet had a different theme: The Image of Man, The World of the Gods, Lust and Beauty, Bread and Circuses, The World of Animals, and Enlightenment – Light & Writing (Fig.12). The pieces in these cases weren't identified by any labels, and were not grouped by location or period, so it was a hectic mix, but well collected and tied together by their themes. The case shown in Fig.14 is full of oil-lamps from various periods.



Figure 13: The Melpomene Statue

Moving on to the visit the Gustav III's Antikmuseum on the Monday, the collection was brought back to Sweden by the King during his Grand Tour, or purchased for him by the first museum curator. Several pieces aren't ancient, there's a pastiche apparently given by Piranesi, and while some of the imperial busts are named, they naming isn't accurate. The guidebook explains all this, but it isn't in English, and my Swedish is non-existent. This means that working out the details of each piece is slow and time-consuming.

However, on to the pieces themselves! The Greater Stone Gallery is filled mostly with full sized statues of the Muses (one of Melpomene, Fig.13), as well as a Priestess and an Athena. It is highly likely that restorations and later additions have taken place to ensure these statues are the Muses. The prize piece is the Endymion statue at the far end of the gallery (Fig.14) and then you have the pastiches behind with a combination of pieces – in the centre is an urn made up of ancient and 18<sup>th</sup>

century pieces, then to the right is a cornucopia consisting of the same mix, as does the decorative composition on the left.



Figure 14: The Endymion and Pastiches

The Lesser Stone Gallery features all the imperial busts, and smaller statuary that the Greater Stone Gallery, hence the name, I guess. Aside from the erroneously named imperial busts and heads, the other highlights of this room are a cinerary urn (Fig.15), and a family urn converted into a fountain.



Figure 15: The Cinerary Urn

In terms of the erroneously named imperial busts, see the table on the next page. All photos will then follow (Figs.16-44).

ORIGINAL IDENTIFICATION	ALTERNATE IDENTIFICATION	ANTIQUÉ OR LATE
Lepidus	Sulla, Quintus Fabius Maximus	Antique – typical of late Republican portraits
Brutus	Anonymous Roman	Antique, but with later retouches
Marcus Agrippa	Anonymous Roman	Antique
Lucius Caesar	Pan	Antique but re-cut
Tiberius	Claudius	Antique, probably re-worked from a portrait of Caligula to Claudius
Caligula	Anonymous Roman	Late - 1700s
Britannicus	Roman Child Portrait	Antique
Agrippina Minor	Faustina Minor	Antique but re-cut and not matching the bust (also antique)
Nero	N/A	Late
Galba	Anonymous Roman	Antique
Vitellius	Titus	Late
Titus	N/A	Antique, bur overworked in post-antique times. Gift from Piranesi.

Trajan	Caesar	Late, copy of a portrait of Caesar in the Capitoline Collection.
Plotina	Anonymous Roman Woman	Antique, but much re-worked
Matidia	Anonymous Roman Woman	Antique
Sabina	N/A	Antique
Antoninus Pius	N/A	Late, copy of an antique
Faustina Major	Faustina Minor	Late
Marcus Aurelius	N/A	Late, copy of an antique bust in Capitoline Collection
Faustina Minor	N/A	Late, copy of an antique in Capitoline Collection
Annius Verus	Child portrait	Late
Lucilla	Anonymous Roman Woman	Antique
Commodus	N/A	Antique
Manlia Scantilla	Anonymous Roman Woman	Antique
Septimius Severus	Anonymous Roman	late
Caracalla	N/A	Antique but much overworked
Gordianus Africanus Pater	Maxentius	Antique
Gordianus III	Anonymous Child Portrait	Antique, but late bust
Gallienus	Anonymous Male Portrait	Antique, but face, back of head and neck restored



Figure 16: The "Lepidus"



Figure 17: The "Brutus"



Figure 18: The "Marcus Agrippa"





Figure 19: The "Lucius Caesar"



Figure 20: The "Tiberius"



Figure 21: The "Caligula"



Figure 22: The "Britannicus"



Figure 23: The "Agrippina



Figure 24: The "Nero"



Figure 25: The "Galba"



Figure 26: The "Vitellius"



Figure 27: The "Titus"



Figure 28: The "Trajan"



Figure 29: The "Plotina"



Figure 30: The "Matidia"



Figure 31: The "Sabina"



Figure 32: The "Antoninus Pius"



Figure 33: The "Faustina Major"



Figure 34: The "Marcus Aurelius"



Figure 35: The "Faustina Minor"



Figure 36: The "Annius Verus"



Figure 37: The "Lucilla"



Figure 38: The "Commodus"



Figure 39: The "Manlia Scintilla"



Figure 40: The "Septimius Severus"



Figure 41: The "Caracalla"



Figure 42: The "Gordianus Africanus Pater"



Figure 43: The "Gordianus III"



Figure 44: The "Gallienus"

So as you can see, there was definitely some issues with identification, not to be entirely unexpected from a country far-removed from the Mediterranean in the early days of Classical sculpture collecting. It is interesting, however, that Piranesi was brought in and gifted pieces to the collection. He was also one of those who identified the Caesar copy as a Trajan, along with the first curator.

To summarise, there is an interesting collection of Classical sculpture and artefacts in the Swedish capital, more than perhaps one was expecting to find. If you are a Classicist and you find yourself in Stockholm, it's definitely worth going and checking out the Medelhavsmuseet and the Gustav III's Antikmuseum in the Royal Palace. Despite them not yet being labelled, all the photos from the Mediterranean Museum can be found at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mumblerjamie/albums/72177720309839021>, and all the photos from the Antikmuseum can be seen here - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mumblerjamie/albums/72177720309839021>

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