

BOOK REVIEW

DYFRI WILLIAMS, *Masterpieces of Classical Art*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press (in co-operation with British Museum Press), 2009. Pp. 360. 235 color plates. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-292-72147-0.

The British Museum (hereafter BM) was founded in 1753 with the stated purpose that “every citizen should have free access to the sum of human understanding,” in fact “the only place in the world where you can see the cultures of the globe gathered together under a single roof.”¹ Perhaps best known outside Britain for its Greek, Roman, and Egyptian collections, the Museum has equally alluring holdings in the art of Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Oceania, and the Americas. The museum is under constant scrutiny by scholars (and to a much lesser extent the public) concerned with the ownership and politics of the past, and it is all too easy to overlook its core educational and research missions. The overtly scholarly outlook of the BM is best demonstrated by a quick trip to the website, where users can search the collections database, order publication quality photographs (many free of charge), and thumb through an issue of the *Bronze Age Review*, an international online journal, or the *Technical Research Bulletin* aimed at scientists and conservators. The same general mentality is also evident on the ground, at the museum itself, where on any given day a visitor might pass an African drum ensemble en route to the recently founded “Enlightenment Gallery.” Its bookstore is packed with affordable museum-sponsored publications, such as this one, only further manifestations of an ongoing desire to disseminate learning in a palatable manner.

Dyfri Williams, Research Keeper (i.e. curator) of Greek and Roman Antiquities, is best known in classical archaeology circles for his publications on decorated pottery and his research on ancient jewelry. His intimate and long-standing relationship with the BM makes him the perfect author of a book devoted to many of the finest specimens of his own Department. Readers should not be put off by the book’s title, which has clearly been chosen to attract the public, the lay reader, the museumgoer, perhaps even the potential donor. The terms “master-

¹ N. MacGregor, “Preface”, in K. Sloan, ed., *Enlightenment: Discovering the World of the Eighteenth Century* (London: The British Museum Trust, 2003) 6.

pieces” and “art” are somewhat ironic ones for a book showcasing an assemblage of archaeological materials housed inside a neoclassical vault on Great Russell Street in central London’s West End. Many of the artifacts have a documented provenance, and a number were excavated in the distant past by the museum itself. But the author, anticipating the critics, explains each of these choices in the preface: “Early Greeks did not have a concept of art, but they did have beautiful craftsmanship (*techne*)” (p. 6); followed by “In this volume pieces of real quality and importance that engender a sense of wonder, as well as those best suited to represent their time and place, have been selected for inclusion as ‘masterpieces’” (p. 7). More compact than the *Oxford History of Classical Art* (ed. J. Boardman, Oxford, 1993) and covering a greater chronological and geographical span, *Masterpieces of Classical Art* is both limited and untroubled by the famous repository it exhibits.

The 160 objects chosen to represent the “material culture of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds” (p. 6) comprise an impressive range of style and type, scale and function. The contents and presentation are extremely straightforward. Seven sections intertwine chronology and geography in a logical manner, and are in fact a helpful guide to the museum galleries themselves. Thus, there are four sections on Greece ranging from the “Prehistoric” (c. 4500–1000 BC) to “The Hellenistic World” (c. 323–31 BC), a single one devoted to Cyprus in all periods, and two covering Italy and the Roman Empire (c. 3000 BC–AD 300); within each of these the order is more or less chronological. Following the core chapters are a brief “History of the British Museum Collection” and supplemental materials (maps, timelines, glossary, further reading). The format is that of a descriptive catalogue. Each entry is numbered, accompanied by a lengthy text and lavish color illustrations. Basic facts – such as medium, dimensions, date, and provenance – are listed separately, so that the main text conveys historical, cultural, artistic, and archaeological information. There is abundant cross-referencing between items and entries. Luckily, the book is not a direct competitor with either *The British Museum Concise Introduction to Ancient Greece* by Jenifer Neils (2008) or *The British Museum Concise Introduction to Ancient Rome* by Nancy and Andrew Ramage (2008).

Scholars of Greek art or frequent visitors to the BM will recognize a good number of the featured pieces. Well-known vases from the collection, such as the Euphorbos plate with the duel of Menelaos and Hektor (no. 23), the Sophilos *dinos* showing the wedding of Peleus and Thetis (no. 26), and the wine-cooler

(*psykter*) signed by Douris adorned with randy satyrs (no. 43), are given equal attention to the less memorable, but as informative Mycenaean Pictorial Style vessels (no. 11), a dark-ground Protogeometric *pyxis* (no. 13), an Etruscan “drinking bowl” depicting a naked youth seated beside a dog (no. 119), or a South Italian red-figure *krater* with an “extremely dramatic, almost operatic” (p. 152) representation of Alkmene on the altar (no. 68). Works of free-standing sculpture again combine the more and less familiar, beginning with Neolithic and Cycladic figurines (nos. 1-2), archaic *kouroi* (nos. 24, 38, 40), the larger-than-life “Mausollos” from Halikarnassos (no. 65), a head of Alexander (no. 71), and Roman portraits of known (no. 148) and unknown figures (no. 146), each one an original carved in hard stone; as well as the Chatsworth Apollo of c. 460 BC (no. 51), Hellenistic portraits (nos. 79, 88), a head of Augustus excavated in the Sudan by John Garstang during the early 20th century (no. 127), and another of Hadrian discovered by London bridge (no. 143), each lovingly produced in bronze. The tradition of Roman marble copies (with their telltale supports) of lost Greek originals in bronze is represented by Myron’s *Discobolus* formerly in the Townley Collection (no. 144) and the Polykleitan “Westmacott Athlete” (no. 150). Sculpted reliefs, beginning with a carved gypsum panel from Mycenae (no. 12), many belonging to major architectural structures of Classical date – the Parthenon (no. 52), the Temple of Athena Nike (no. 55), the Temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassai (no. 57), the Harpy Tomb from Xanthos (no. 46), the Nereid Monument (no. 61), and the early Hellenistic Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (no. 72) – are among of the best represented, if more controversial items.

Other arts, or what have misleadingly been termed “minor arts” (after the German *Kleinkunst*) are well-represented by Williams, and give a deeper and wider view of the material culture of these times and places than could ever be expressed by large-scale sculpture or decorated vases alone. Multiple examples of bronze figurines (no. 18), vessels (no. 115) and armor (no. 42), gold jewelry (nos. 7, 77, 141), vessels of silver (nos. 80, 134), glass (nos. 97, 133), or the two combined (no. 136) are some of the finest objects in terms of style and craftsmanship. Metals are also represented by coinage, which many would not list as “art,” yet may bear stylistic or thematic comparison with other media, and are indeed a part of the visual culture of antiquity. Engraved seals or gems demonstrate various materials (e.g. agate [nos. 6, 34]; yellow jasper [no. 83]), techniques (e.g. engraving [no. 128]; cameo [no. 135]), and decorative themes (e.g. myth [no. 34]; portraiture [nos. 83, 128]). Also belonging to the broad category of

other arts are terracotta figurines (nos. 82, 01), painting on both large (no. 134) and small scale (no. 153), and mosaic (no. 125). Rather rarer from these parts are elaborate and well-articulated artifacts of faience (no. 84) or gypsum (no. 109) or bone (no. 157). At the risk of sounding absurdly selective, the Minoan bronze bull-leaper (no. 5), the “Iberian” gold brooch (no. 85), the Roman chalcedony portrait of Drusilla (no. 138), and the amber perfume vessel (no. 142) from the 2nd century AD, are simply not to be missed.

Finally, special mention should be made of the Cypriot art and its inclusion in the catalogue, which may surprise some readers. The eastern Mediterranean island has often been viewed as a cultural melting pot, a crossroads, or an exotic blend of peoples and material goods. By featuring the arts of ancient Cyprus here, it would seem that we are meant to view them as closer to Greece or Rome than to the Near East or Anatolia. The observable similarity of much Cypriot art to Near Eastern or Greek may be explained in terms of “influence” (p. 219) or “assimilation” (pp. 220, 223), when in fact “the mix of styles ... is typically Cypriot” (p. 219). More to the point, however, antiquities of Cypriot origin are under the care of the Department of Greece and Rome at the BM, as are Minoan, Mycenaean and Etruscan, each also found in this book. The find-spots of these and other objects span much of the ancient known world and its points of contact, interaction, and trade.

Regardless of production place, provenance, or intrinsic beauty, Williams appreciates the often conjectural nature of much archaeological and iconographic interpretation. This is evidenced by his description of a Late Geometric spouted krater (no. 17) for which “there are a number of possible interpretations”, or an Etruscan bronze mirror (no. 116) where the inscribed name “Mlacuch” may have either mythological or mortal connotations. The staples of the collection – from the MacMillan *Aryballos* (no. 22) to the Portland Vase (no. 133) – punctuate this *embarras des richesses*. With so many treasures on offer (and over 100,000 to choose from), it is best simply to dive in, thumb through, explore up close, relish from afar.

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