

Inside the Fitzwilliam Museum

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Caroline Mackenzie meets artist and gallery attendant Manuela Hübner of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge to discuss the enduring influence of Cycladic art on modern artists – and life in the Greek and Roman galleries today

Manuela, tell us about the objects you have chosen and why.

The objects I have chosen are the two Cycladic figurines from The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. The reason I have chosen them is that in 2015 I worked with an archaeologist, Dr. Evi Margaritis, on an art and science collaboration called 'Pint of Science' where I had to create a piece of work inspired by Dr. Margaritis's research. After studying her research, which dealt with the Cycladic and prehistoric era, I wanted to see for real some of the objects that were referred to. The only place I could find them was in The Fitzwilliam Museum.

Dr. Margaritis's research topic was 'Bread, bulgur, wine and olive oil: food in antiquity'. Therefore, we were looking at research based on old olive stones that had been found. In fact, they were charred olive stones, as for organic matter to survive it has to be either

burned or frozen. Dr. Margaritis was therefore working a lot with different seeds that had been charred and were found in graves. Some of those graves also contained Cycladic figurines and that is where the connection came in. When I saw the figurines, I became excited and thought I had something to work with.



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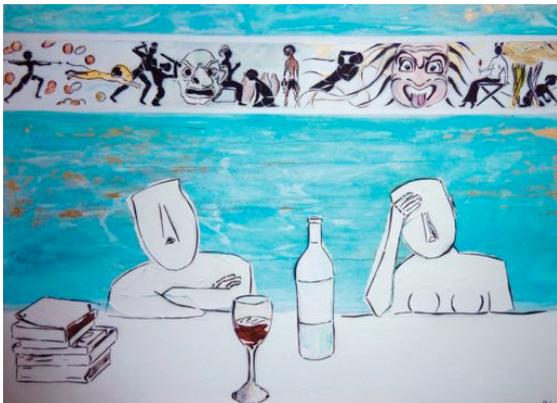
Please could you describe the visual qualities of Cycladic figurines?

What I like about them is that they are very old but they look really modern. I like the simplicity of the shape. This lends itself to cartoon, which is what I ended up doing: turning them into cartoon figures. Also, I love their whiteness - I know they were originally coloured - but we just know them as white and I like the monochrome and the simple, minimalist shape. They have a serene beauty about them which is why they grabbed my attention.

The project you worked on is where your piece 'The Realisation' came from. It is a wonderful

and striking piece of art. Could you tell us a bit more about it?

Thank you! It is funny how it came about because it was a combination of things. I read Dr. Margaritis's research papers and I spent time in the library reading up on Greek art and culture. I had to get inspiration from somewhere and I had two months from the time that I first met with Dr. Margaritis to the final exhibition of the art work that I made. There was a bit of time pressure and there were so many different strands to research and different avenues that I could have gone down. I was mulling over many different things and did not know quite where to go with this. What really hit me was that, amongst all the scientific detail of Dr. Margaritis's research, what it said to me about humanity is that we have not really changed that much at all. We eat the same things: bread, bulgur, olive oil and wine, and not just in the Mediterranean now. Also, these foods are still produced in pretty much the same traditional way.



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Through my own research around that topic, I discovered that our motivation for doing things is still the same: it is usually money/greed, or love/lust, or power - possibly negative things - but essentially these have not changed. We have slightly more sophisticated ways and means, tools and systems but fundamentally it is still the same. I came to that 'realisation' one evening, talking to my then partner over a glass of wine so the painting probably reflects that moment: of me realising all of those things and getting the visual idea of what to create. The two Cycladic figurines

which I cartoonised represent two people talking in a social situation.

So is it part self-portrait?

In a way, yes. The person on the right is having a bit of a moment! It was a big project and I had to consume so much intellectually. There is definitely a little bit of me in the person with her head in her hands at that point. But it does not just represent me - it also represents human beings in general. For example, when you look at the frieze in the background of the painting, it represents what was going on then and now: there are people warring (we are still fighting around the world); hunting is taking place, not just for food (just as people these days hunt for money, fame and glory). We are still enjoying the same things such as theatre, we still have social hierarchies, we still worship and offer sacrifices in one way or another. Also, we still like the simple things in life: just chilling out or lying in the sun. We still admire beauty - there is vanity - and we have agriculture, the daily preparation of food and so on. Nothing much has changed. The theatrical mask in the frieze represents some of the horrors that are still happening today.

The date when you produced this was 2015 and what you have been saying rings very true at that time.

Absolutely - the two people are also reflecting on what is going on in the world and maybe thinking, 'What on earth can we do here? What can we do to change this?' They are both looking almost a little despondent - although the character on the left looks a little more accepting - so in a way it is a political comment.

What is interesting, though, is the feedback I have had from the work is that some people saw things that I had not consciously seen. For example, they were looking at the couple and asking if they had just had an argument. So it could also say something about relationships - there is clearly disharmony here somewhere. There are many different aspects to it: it is a social comment, a political comment and a little bit of self-portrait.

The two figures in the picture are drinking red wine but there is only one glass...

That is for artistic purposes! Whilst it is not something I did consciously, it could represent a divide. The painting is divided into three sections, both horizontally and vertically. There is the pile of books, which also represents the real process, as I had been reading a lot for this project. Again, you could interpret this in several ways: this is the literature we consume today, which could be news, or research or anything.

The painting says something about those two human beings as well and their culture: you have literature, wine, the frieze at the top and some sophistication in there. This reflects ancient Greece, as well as the sophistication and culture in Greece today.

When did you become an artist and what first inspired you?

It is a long story! What I'm doing now, which I'm really committed to, I've been doing since 2012. I have exhibitions every year. I wanted to go to art school in my early twenties but I never did so for personal reasons - it just did not work out at the time. I then ended up doing a different job as I had to make money somehow. But I kept on doing different things, such as going to life drawing classes so I am fundamentally self-taught. I haven't seen an art school from the inside! I spent some time in Paris and was at the Sorbonne for a couple of terms, part of which was studying art history. Art has kept coming up throughout my life. Then five years ago, I thought, 'It's now or never'.

A realisation?

In a way!

When did you first encounter ancient Greek art and sculpture and what impact did it have on you?

The very first time I got in touch with Greek culture was when I was probably about eight

years' old. I had a local library where I went once a week and would come back home with a pile of books. They had a history and science series and I got absolutely hooked on Greek mythology. I knew the names of all the Greek gods and what they were represented. I was fascinated.

Has that had some influence on your work?

I think so. What happened with the 'Pint of Science' project was that I had put my preference down in a different field of research but due to an error I was not paired with that scientist. I was told there was an archaeologist with whom I could work and what her topic was. My reaction was that food is one of my least favourite topics! On the other hand, as it was about ancient Greece, I thought there must be a reason for this and decided to go for it. Since childhood days, I have felt an affinity with ancient Greece - for me, it has always represented beauty, elegance and sophistication; and interesting stories about the legends and the gods.

I absolutely hit the jackpot with Dr. Margaritis - she was brilliant. I met so many people through her with whom I'm still in touch now including archaeologists and colleagues at The Fitzwilliam Museum.

Tell us about your role at The Fitzwilliam Museum.

I am front of house staff and that means I work in the galleries as a gallery attendant but also on reception. Basically, I am the first point of contact for visitors. They ask me all sorts of questions from 'Where are the toilets?' to really specific art questions - they always assume you are an expert. I don't just work in the Greek and Roman gallery as we rotate.

What sort of reaction do visitors have to the Greek and Roman gallery?

They love it. It is one of the most popular galleries, especially for children. When children visit, either in school groups or with their families, they always go there first. It is because of the stories. I think that is what I

was always loved about Greek art. Even the ceramics are telling a story and that is something that I think has got lost today, especially with ceramics. That is why I would love to work with Grayson Perry so much because what he does is tell stories on his vases. The ancient Greeks did this as well - their vases made comments on life.

Why do think ancient Greek art is still relevant today?

As we discussed earlier, when we looked at the Cycladic figurines in The Fitzwilliam Museum, some of the figurines have long necks - in modern art and society this is often portrayed as a sign of beauty. A lot of ancient beauty ideals, not just when it comes to women but in general, are still valid today. Most people would be more than happy with a Greek marble sculpture in their garden! Greek art is just beautiful: it is aesthetically pleasing.

Regarding the Cycladic figurines specifically, do you have any thoughts as to what they may have represented? Does it even matter or should we just enjoy them as art?

We can just enjoy them as art or as objects/sculptures but we can also muse about what they were used for. They could represent the lover or the self; they could have been used as currency for social transactions; or perhaps they had a spiritual purpose and were the material embodiment of something spiritual.

Earlier today, you and I were privileged to be able to hold some of the Cycladic figurines at The Fitzwilliam Museum, which is not possible for most visitors. What do you think are the limitations of museum displays of artefacts such as these?

That is an interesting question because in my work as a gallery attendant what I notice is the huge instinct and natural tendency to touch objects. I have constantly to ask people (not just children!) not to touch. It is natural to want to touch something that is smooth and marble, for example the Greek sarcophagus, known as the Strigil Sarcophagus, in the Fitzwilliam, which has a beautiful relief.

Museums are dealing with this through their handling sessions. Quite often they have replicas made especially for these. For example, The Fitzwilliam Museum has a replica of the Lansdowne relief which is for educational purposes. However, I don't think you need to touch everything to appreciate it.

Do you feel differently about what the figurines' purpose may have been now you have handled some, as opposed to just looking at them through a glass case?

I don't think my thoughts have changed by holding them. It was similar when I was working with Dr. Margaritis and I was holding one of the 4,000 to 5000 year-old charred olive stones - just holding something that old, that a human 4,000 years ago made or touched is amazing. I just wish these objects could talk because of what could they tell us. I find it awe inspiring that someone somewhere handled this so long ago and now I am here holding it, too.

How do you think we can encourage more children and adults to study ancient Greece including its wealth of art and archaeology?

With children, it's easy: tell them stories; and let them touch! When I was a child, I loved stories about Aphrodite, Zeus, Hera and what their symbols were, such as the owl on Athene's shoulder - all of those things and what the gods were doing fascinated me. It's the same thing as fairy tales - these days, you may have to package it slightly differently, such as using animation.

What about adults who may not have had the opportunity to enjoy the ancient Greek world as children?

Again, I think it depends on how you package it. For example, when I was working in the Greek gallery one day, a young couple in their twenties came in. The young man looked at one of the marble busts, read the label and said, "That's the guy in *Gladiator!*". He knew the character from the film - which takes us

back to my point about stories - these days they often need to be told through film, or books.

When people connect with something in the museum it is often because they have already seen it somewhere else, whether through the medium of film or literature. I think that visual animation these days is key.

Do you think that some people who saw your piece 'The Realisation' were not familiar with Cycladic figurines but subsequently may have either looked for them, or chanced upon them in The Fitzwilliam Museum and recognised them?

That's a tough question and I don't know the answer. I'm not sure what effect my work will have had on people and whether it brought them closer to Cycladic art. Classicists and archaeologists may have recognised the connection. One archaeologist said that what he loved about it was that I had brought the Cycladic figurines, which are very plank-like, to life. He said that as they look real, with personalities, people could relate to the two figures, who are very simply a man and a woman.

You have mentioned Modigliani to me in a previous conversation - have modern interpretations of the Cycladic figurines inspired you as much as the originals themselves?

Not when I was first researching Cycladic figurines; but after I had completed the piece and I began to look to other modern art, I could recognise a lot of the shapes of the figurines. Modigliani painted a lot of elongated faces as did Picasso, not just in his cubist paintings. For example, in his famous work *Les Femmes d'Alger* he has stripped it back down to basic lines and almost geometric shapes. Possibly these artists were influenced by Cycladic art. Also in some African art (for example, their masks) you find the same simplicity.

Henry Moore was definitely influenced by Cycladic art - he spoke of this and we even

have photographs of him handling Cycladic figurines. I am reminded also of Brancusi.

Henry Moore certainly studied Cycladic figurines. Other artists might also have been struck by their aesthetic beauty and simplicity and then used those qualities in their own work.

Do you have any other projects in mind inspired by the Greek and Roman gallery?

Last year, when I started sketching with my left hand (see #LeftTurn on my website), I drew some of the Greek and Roman sculptures. Where my artistic path is going to lead me next, I do not know. I am a creative opportunist! Life usually takes you in a direction that you cannot foresee. It is opportunities and ideas that come out of nowhere which excite me.

Is there any particular ancient Greek artefact or site that you would like to see, if you have not already had the opportunity to do so?

I definitely want to go back to Greece, particularly the Cyclades. I have been to Athens and up the Acropolis but I would love to go back, and also to visit Cyprus. I am German and grew up in Germany but I feel very Mediterranean!

End.

Manuela Hübner is a Front of House Host at The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. She is also an artist and her website is www.manuelahubner.com

Caroline Mackenzie read Classics at Pembroke College, Cambridge. After practising as a solicitor for a decade, she ran a Latin and Greek department in a prep. school in Sevenoaks. Currently, she is studying for an MA in Classical Art and Archaeology at King's College, London whilst continuing to teach Latin and Greek through private tuition and outreach days in schools in London and Kent.

She is also writing her first book.