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Cycladic figurines in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

INSIDE THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

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 your favourite objects in the Fitzwilliam Museum

The objects I have chosen are two Cycladic figurines. They have a serene beauty to them which is why they grabbed my attention. In 2015 I worked with an archaeologist, Evi Margaritis (of the Cyprus Institute) on an art and science collaboration called 'Pint of Science'. I had to create a piece of art inspired by Dr

Margaritis' research. After studying her paper, 'Bread, bulgur, wine and olive oil: food in antiquity', which dealt with the Cycladic and prehistoric eras, I wanted to see for real some of the objects that were referred to. We initially looked at 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 working a lot with different seeds that had been charred and found in graves. Some of these graves also contained Cycladic figures, and that is where the connection came in. When I saw the them, I became excited and thought I had something to work with. I found some excellent examples in 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. I work in the Greek and Roman galleries, among others, as we rotate.

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

This is one of the most popular parts of the museum, especially among children. When children visit, either in school groups or with their families, they always go there first. It is because of the stories. The ceramics are telling a story and that is something that I think is lost from ceramics today. Grayson Perry does tell stories on his vases, however, as the Greeks did on theirs. Their vases provide commentaries on life.

You and I are privileged to be handling today some of the Fitzwilliam Museum's Cycladic figurines, 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 like marble, for example the Strigil Sarcophagus, which has a beautiful relief. Museums are dealing with this through their handling sessions. Quite often they have replicas made especially for these events. For example, the Fitzwilliam Museum has a replica of the Lansdowne Relief which is used for educational purposes.

Regarding the Cycladic figurines specifically, do you have any thoughts as to what they may represent? 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.

The project you worked on with Dr Margaritis 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!

After reading Dr Margaritis' research papers I spent time in the library reading up on Greek art and culture. I had two months from the time of our first meeting to the final exhibition. 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. What really hit me was that, amongst all the scientific detail of Dr Margaritis' research, what it said to me about humanity is that we have not really changed much. 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 ways.

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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 prompted usually by money/greed or love/lust or the pursuit of 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 this 'realization' one evening whilst talking to my then partner over a glass of wine, so the painting probably reflects that moment: of me realizing 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.



© Manuela Hübner

'The Realisation' by Manuela Hübner, inspired by Cycladic art

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 alone – 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 fighting (we are still at war around the world) and 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 the 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. The theatrical mask in the frieze represents some of the horrors that are still happening today.

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.

Might people who see the final painting and chance upon the Cycladic figures in the museum afterwards recognize them from your work?

That's a tough question and I don't know the answer. I'm not sure what effect my work will have had on

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people and whether it has brought them closer to Cycladic art. Classicists and archaeologists may have recognized 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.

I find though that 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. For example, when I was working in the Greek gallery one day, a young couple in their 20s 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. I think that visual animation these days is key.

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 recognize 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 Demoiselles d'Avignon* he has stripped back down to basic lines and 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 influenced by Cycladic art – he spoke of this and we even have photographs of him handling Cycladic figurines. I am reminded also of Brancusi [Brancusi's *Prometheus* is on display in Cambridge's Kettle's Yard Museum].

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.

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 20s, 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!

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