

Following Hercules: The Story of Classical Art

25 September - 6 December 2015 | Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Free admission

A colossal polystyrene statue of Hercules by contemporary artist Matt Darbyshire will be the star exhibit in a new exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum exploring the story of classical art.

How did artefacts made in the Mediterranean millennia ago come to define western art? To show us how Greece and Rome's gods and heroes came to inhabit post-antique painting and sculpture, the Fitzwilliam Museum has called upon one of them to act as a guide: Hercules.

Hercules is one of the best-loved ancient heroes. Known in antiquity for completing twelve tasks or 'labours' that confirmed his status as a god, Hercules is today tasked with one more - to tell the story of classical art. Hercules is brought to life by each of the forty objects on display (from exquisite gems and coins, Renaissance drawings and bronzes, to eighteenth-century paintings, and Matthew Darbyshire's giant polystyrene statue...). Their interaction also reveals how classical art was born, and gives classical art on-going relevance.

The exhibition takes its lead from its star exhibit, a colossal sculpture by Cambridge-born artist Matthew Darbyshire. Darbyshire's intervention is a version of the Farnese Hercules, a marble statue unearthed in Rome in 1546, but is made from sheets of polystyrene - classical art for a consumerist age. Up close, its cut, crisp polystyrene layers make it appear pixelated, but step back, and the statue comes into focus, shining like marble. Back in 1850, two years after the Founder's Building opened to the public, the Fitzwilliam Museum exhibited another Farnese Hercules, a plaster version, now in Cambridge's Museum of Classical Archaeology. Before being given to the Fitzwilliam, it stood in a private house in Battersea, where it moved London's artists to tears.

The Fitzwilliam Museum's own collection is well equipped with prototypes and later versions of the Farnese Hercules: from a bronze statuette of the first century BCE, through Hendrick Goltzius'



Hercules (detail), 2014, Matthew Darbyshire, polystyrene, h. 315cm, lent by Robert Tucker and Jonathan Wilmot, Restoration House, Rochester, Kent



Hercules and the Erymanthian boar, c. 1790, Wedgwood, Etruria, Staffordshire, Jasperware plaque (h. 212 mm)
© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge



Torso of the Belvedere, adapted as Hercules with a lion skin, sixteenth century, Italian, bronze (h. 196 mm)
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sixteenth-century engraving of the Farnese statue's rear view, Wedgwood's white on blue cameo plaque, and William Blake's illustration of the statue for Abraham Rees' *The Cyclopædia, or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*. The Museum's collection also provides competing images of Hercules – images of Hercules young, drunk, or dressed as a woman, in bronze, wood and painted porcelain. These give context to Darbyshire's sculpture, underlining that classicism and modernism are not opposites. In the fast moving, digital age in which we live, we perhaps need tradition more than ever.

The exhibition is curated by Dr Caroline Vout, Reader in Classics in the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Christ's College, and is part of her British-Academy funded research project entitled 'Classical Art: A Life History'.

- Ends -

For further information and images contact the Press Office:
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Notes to editors:

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB
FREE ADMISSION

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00
Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00
CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January and Good Friday.

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

The Fitzwilliam is celebrating its 200th anniversary in 2016.
www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk