



A tribute to the world of myth: Ovid and Holkham Hall

Depictions of myth

Jessica Hughes:

I always find it helpful to think of artists as illustrating stories rather than particular texts. With a few exceptions it's very hard to tie down any particular representation to a text, and although we used to think of Ovid and Ovid's often called the painter's bible, the extent to which painters actually open the pages of the book is hard to judge.

In the first and second centuries CE, sculptors portrayed single figures in Hellenistic poses.

Jessica Hughes:

Amongst the images that we have from the 1st and 2nd centuries we're mainly looking at marble statues, so these are statues that Thomas Coke collected when he was on his Grand Tour.

Jessica Hughes:

This is a statue of Marsyas who was a satyr whose story is told by Ovid in Book 6 of the *Metamorphoses*. He's linked to the flutes and some people say that he invented the flute and some people just that he became a brilliant performer. But he was so confident in his ability that he challenged the god Apollo to a musical contest which, you know it's never a particularly good idea to challenge a god. People think that Marsyas is represented at the moment when he's finished playing, he's done his bit, and then Apollo starts to play and Marsyas, his face drops, and thinks oh my goodness, I've lost, and it's this realisation that something pretty bad is going to happen to him.

Jessica Hughes:

Ovid only devotes about eighteen lines to the Marsyas story and he doesn't talk about the contest, which we think is represented here. His account focuses on the flaying and the torture, and it's a very gory scene where Marsyas is screaming, and the flesh is coming away, and he says this very evocative line "Why do you tear me from myself"? Now that obviously bears very little relation to what we see here. This sculptor in the 2nd century AD could have chosen to go down a more Ovidian line, or he could have followed his Hellenistic predecessors who showed the moment of the contest, which was much calmer, and that's the route that he went down.

By the Middle Ages artists had found a new medium for portraying myth.

Jeremy Dimmick:

The nature of the mediaeval book makes it possible to have these fabulous paintings as part of the design of books. The most important medium actually for arts, certainly secular art in the late Middle Ages would be books like this.

Jeremy Dimmick:

We're looking here at the story of Scylla, the daughter of King Nisus. Now what's going on here is that King Nisus is under siege but Megara can never fall for as long as King Nisus keeps a certain lock of hair, he has this purple lock of hair, and you can see that there's lots of different stages of the story illustrated. Scylla herself appears what four times in the picture as she gazes at her would-be love she betrays her father, she presents the father's hair to Minos, she's setting sail at the end, and it's not laid out like a comic strip in a series of individual panels. Now some mediaeval artists would do it that way, sequentially, but this one is integrated into this very complicated, multi-layered frame.

Jeremy Dimmick:

The focus of this picture is very different from Ovid's focus. Ovid is not very interested in the fighting. Almost all of his version of the story is really told entirely from Scylla's point of view, so I think this kind of concern with warfare that dominates the picture much, much more than it dominates Ovid's telling of the story, is one of the things that kind of shows this to be a product of its time.

The eighteenth century brought a proliferation of different depictions of myth.

Jessica Hughes:

The 18th century part of the collection is represented mainly by paintings, and what we get here is very much the large, impressive canvas paintings, and in contrast with the classical statues in this collection these are full of colour, and you get two or more, sometimes crowds of people within the same canvas, so it's a very nice contrast between the white surface of the classical marble and the single figure, and then these canvases teeming with colour. There's so many different ways of representing, say, the Rape of Europa, or the Birth of Venus, that it's difficult to think of them as coming from a single source.

In some sculptures, the second century CE came together with the eighteenth century.

Jessica Hughes:

Myth was so highly valued at the time, it wasn't enough for a statue to be old, it had to have its own story as well and its name.

Jessica Hughes:

This statue is really interesting. It was made in the first half of the 2nd century AD. When it was found, though, it didn't look very much like this at all because you can see, if you look closely you can see that there are, joints have been made just above the knees, and then just below the shoulder here, and actually all of this part with the tree trunks supporting the boar's head was all added in the 18th century by a restorer called Bartolomeo Cavaceppi, I mean he was one of the most famous sculptor-restorers working in Rome during that time.

The baroque sculpting style of the boar's head contrasts with second-century original.

Jessica Hughes:

Cavaceppi added the boar's head as an attribute which allowed viewers who'd read their Ovid, or were familiar with classical mythology from other sources, to look at this and actually situate this particular beautiful naked youth as Meleagar, someone with his own story and own significance. Now what Cavaceppi did with this statue is similar to what he was doing with many other torsos and fragments that were found around the city and around Italy, and indeed what other restorers were doing as well. Not just aesthetically smoothing over and filling in the lost bits, but adding iconographical attributes which made these into characters from myth and which then could be sold on to patrons who could display them in their homes, and use them to embody stories.