

References to Antiquity in Visual Arts (1848-1914)

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Presentation

To make the most of this visit it is worth revising a few aspects of the cultural and artistic background.

1. In the 19th century, receiving an education was the preserve of the small minority who were able to attend the lycées (senior secondary schools). The curriculum was largely based on the “humanities” which meant learning classical languages through a method of impregnation. The historian Ernest Lavis, who devised the most popular text books of the time, summarized this method with the words: “I have the feeling to have come from a noble, foreign and remote background. I have lived in Athens in the times of Pericles, in Rome in the times of Augustus...” although he went on to denounce the failures of an education system in which rhetoric occupied the first place. The most important exercise was speechwriting, especially in Latin. Writing a speech meant attributing noble words to great characters: Pericles or Diocletian could not possibly be expected to speak in banal, every day language. Only memorable phrases illustrating Antique virtues, taken from texts studied in class, were worthy enough to be studied by the future graduates of the baccalaureate.

Young artists studying at the École des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts) received a similar education although instead of the baccalaureate they were aiming for the institution's highest accolade, the Prix de Rome.

2. One style and one personality dominated the École des Beaux-Arts: Neoclassicism and Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867). Ingres' sole teaching model was the ideal of classical beauty which could only be attained by the painstaking study and copying of Antique sources. This meant asserting the importance of drawing over colour, and the symmetry and clarity of the composition over movement, principles which became ossified in the hands of artists of lesser genius. The teachers of the École des Beaux-Arts strove to maintain the Neoclassical tradition: the students' spending most of their time copying casts of Antique statues or life models, frozen in poses inspired by the Classics. Above all Antique statuary was considered to be the quintessential embodiment of the concept of Beauty. Naturally, the competition subjects for the Prix de Rome were almost always chosen from Greco-Roman literature. Despite this, armed with a greater or lesser degree of radicalism, independent artists (Realists, Impressionists) and even so-called “official” artists (i.e. those who were sanctioned by the state and who exhibited successfully at the annual Salon) tried other paths.

3. Among these other paths, one was widely successful: that of official art towards the end of Louis-Phillippe's reign, under Napoleon III

and the Third Republic. These artists, whose patrons were members of the nobility and the upper bourgeoisie, and who sold many works to the State upheld a stylistic movement known as Eclecticism. Disregarding hierarchical criteria, they were happy to glean inspiration from any artistic period (the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, etc. as much as Classical Antiquity) and to feature in their works, with increasing archaeological accuracy, a variety of iconographic elements such as costumes, settings, etc. They founded their movement on a doctrine called Historicism. Their approach differed from the Neoclassicists following the Beaux-Arts' tradition, insofar as they did not hesitate to juxtapose several traditions, without giving the slightest prevalence to Antiquity.

But aside from Academicism and Eclecticism, Antiquity made its mark on many other stylistic movements in 19th century art. Styles that were formally more innovative, in both painting and sculpture, turned once again to Antiquity, especially towards the end of the century. This “return to the Antique” is the object of the third part of the visit.

NB: references to Antiquity may be textual or visual.

- Textual references: besides the whole of Greco-Roman literature most of which was available in translation and chosen excerpts, 19th century artists had access to mythological dictionaries called “dictionnaires de la Fable”. They did not discriminate in any significant way between mythological, historical and literary sources.
- Visual references: the 19th century was an era of intense archaeological research. The exhumed sculptures, and newly discovered decor were universally admired and supplied models for artists.

Targeted public

1. lower and upper secondary school pupils (3rd to final year) studying Latin or Greek.
2. Pupils taking visual arts or art history options.
3. 5th and 6th year pupils studying 19th century history.

Objectives

1. To show pupils studying Latin and Greek language and civilisation, that the 19th century, a period much closer to our own, considered classical Antiquity as a vivid source of inspiration and gave it a prominent place in its artistic vocabulary.
2. To address the problem of transposing elements from the civilisation of one era onto the visual arts of another. This means discussing the notion of interpretation, through visual means, of a canon set by tradition.
3. To discover and compare the various mediums (painting, sculpture, objets d'art) and styles (neoclassicism, eclecticism, symbolism, post-impressionism) available in the Musée d'Orsay from a common angle: the use they made of the reference to Antiquity (this is generally a new discovery for pupils who often tend to think of the Musée d'Orsay solely in terms of its impressionist collection).
4. Finally, to simultaneously encourage:
 - curiosity (by searching out and identifying scenes related to Greek and Roman literature, history or mythology).
 - a critical facility (comparing modes of reference to Antiquity by studying very different artworks from a formal point of view).
 - a proactive and personal approach to the museum visit.

The visit: the artworks

Part One: ... from fidelity... to pastiche; or the Antique's progressive loss of meaning to a "mock Antiquity"

1. Eugène Guillaume (1822-1905):
The Gracchi (1847-48), double bust, bronze
Location: ground floor, central aisle

Here the sculptor represented the cenotaph of Caius and Tiberus Gracchus. The inscriptions on the roll where the two brothers' hands meet is: "LEX LICINIA DE AGR. P.Q.R. DIVIDENDIS" and on the front plinth: "T. ET C. SEMPRONII F. GRACCHIS TRIB. PLEBIS OPTIME DE ROMANO MERITIS" provide opportunities to remind pupils of the historic role played by the two tribunes. This work is typical of the Neoclassical movement which promoted fidelity to the Antique model. It offers a threefold reference:

- literary: the Gracchi are known thanks to Plutarch's *Lives of Illustrious Men* (46-120 AD) in which the historian drew a double parallel between the two Spartan revolutionary kings Agis and Cleomenes, and the two Roman brothers; all noblemen by birth who supported the struggle against the nobility.
- historical: the words inscribed by the sculptor on the plinth are, as we have seen, a direct allusion to C. Licinus Stolo's agrarian law which the Gracchi upheld.
- formal: the cenotaph (empty funeral monument), is a kind of Antique monument erected to honour the memory of a deceased person that does not contain the corpse.

The critics of the time were aware of these references and praised the sculpture as a contemporary artwork capable of vying with those of Antiquity: "if Plutarch's tale happened to be lost, it would be kept alive in this sculpture. As genuinely Roman as the most characteristic works of the "peuple-roi" even Antiquity herself could not have achieved such a composition for this group" (Arsène Houssaye, "Les statues françaises à l'Exposition universelle de Londres" (1862) in *L'Artiste*).

See also:

Cavelier: *Cornelia, Mother of the Gracchi*, sculpted group (ground floor, central aisle)

2. Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867):
Venus in Paphos, 1852-53, oil on canvas
Location: ground floor, central aisle, gallery 1

Ingres had begun this canvas with the portrait of a female courtier of Napoleon III but she left the capital and it remained unfinished with only the features of her face sketched out. Ingres decided to take the canvas in a different direction; "adorn[ing] the head with a nude body, he painted a Venus. This process was oddly reminiscent of the Classical artists' practice of choosing models from

among their friends and relatives to represent the deities of Mount Olympus. By turning the erstwhile portrait into a mythological subject, Ingres had ennobled his painting: Antique nudity was ranked on a par with history painting, and was at the top of the hierarchy of accepted Neoclassical genres. Here, the artist's central preoccupation was the pursuit of an ideal of beauty: the pale and pearly flesh tones of the body of the goddess ensure that it stands out from the background. The painting testifies to Ingres' detachment from realism which sees him going as far as to make strange distortions of the bust. The artwork has been sufficiently well documented for us to know that it was not Ingres who gave it its present title. But the mythological reference is nevertheless discreetly suggested by two clearly identifiable details, even though they are secondary compared with the central figure: the child and the corner of a temple visible in the upper left corner of the painting. Accompanying Aphrodite-Venus with Eros-Cupid, her son, was a timeless iconographic tradition; the temple also justifies the title: according to the legend, when her liaison with Mars was discovered and exposed by her husband, Vulcan the goddess took refuge in the Cypriote city of Paphos. Throughout Antiquity, the cult of Venus was celebrated in Paphos and by the 19th century the remains of a temple devoted to her were already known.

See also:

Ingres: *Jupiter and Antiope*, 1851 (same gallery)

3. Alexandre Cabanel (1825-1889):
The Birth of Venus, 1865
Location: ground floor, gallery 5

Ten years after Ingres' Venus, here is another, and one which presents a very different kind of relationship to Antiquity. Although there is a fidelity to the narrative elements of the myth - the goddess is lying on the foaming crest of a wave where she is supposed to have been born - it is a far cry from the chaste and idealised eroticism of *Venus in Paphos*. The pose of Cabanel's Venus evokes neither birth nor awakening: it is rather a sort of stretching, which highlights her charms according to the conventions of the erotic code. The garland of cupids presiding over this birth has the formal function of accentuating the curves of the goddess's body. But the nude is still idealised, a fact which prompted Zola to comment: "the goddess, drowned in a river of milk, looks like a delicious harlot, made not of flesh and blood - that would be indecent - but of a sort of pink and white almond paste". Actually such idealisation was little more than a visual sop to titillate the bourgeoisie of the Second Empire. In this Cabanel was wholly successful as the painting was bought by Napoleon III the same year that Manet painted *Olympia* which, becoming an object of public sarcasm, was dubbed "The Venus of the suburbs".

See also:

Manet: *Olympia*, 1865 (ground floor, gallery 14)



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1. Guillaume : *Les Gracques*, 1847-48
2. Cavelier : *Cornélie, mère des Gracques*, 1861
3. Ingres : *Vénus à Paphos*, 1852-53
4. Ingres : *Jupiter et Antiope*, 1851
5. Cabanel : *Naissance de Vénus*, 1865

4. Julien-Hippolyte Moulin (1832-1884): *Secret from Above*, marble group, 1879
Location: ground floor, central aisle

What secret can this mocking Mercury be whispering in the ear of the jovial old faun? This sculpture is typical of an Eclectic style, genre piece “à l’Antique”: it no longer refers to Neoclassical values, neither does it aspire to greatness or moral elevation, all sense of the *exemplum* has been shed. Without referring to precise mythological or literary sources the artist has appropriated the motif of the term*, mainly to highlight and balance the supple and graceful male nude. The scene is thus stripped of all mythical or ritual material. The atmosphere of complicity that reigns between the two characters, accentuated by the nonchalance of Mercury’s pose, corresponds to the spirit of mock Antiquity - light and facetious - as it may be found in Offenbach’s operettas where Homeric heroes are reduced to the level of Parisian salon wit, typical of the late 19th century.

* “term”; a column topped by a bust representing an rustic divinity. Used as landmarks at the crossings of Roman paths, they were the object of a cult at the time of *terminalia*.

Part Two: The reference to Antiquity used as a pretext

a) Its use as a pretext for a political message

1. Paul-Charles Galbrunner (1823-1905): *Napoleon III*, bust, 1866, diverse precious materials
Location: ground floor, gallery 9

2. Adolphe David (1828-1895): *Apotheosis of Napoleon I*, cameo on ash-grey sardonyx with white veins (model by Ingres)
Location: same gallery

These two objects are fine examples of the way in which artists in the second half of the 19th century, made use of the reference to Antiquity as a pretext or vehicle. The portrayal of monarchs as Roman emperors was not new: it had been used so often under the Ancien Régime that these pieces can be seen in terms of their continuity. Galbrunner’s bust presents Napoleon III wearing a toga and laurel crown; the signs which encapsulate all the powers to be found in the person of the Roman emperor (*Imperator Caesar Augustus*). Certainly Napoleon, known as “the small”, was in favour of the development of an official imagery that would reinforce popular faith in the Emperor, especially during the later part of his reign (the artwork is dated 1866). David’s cameo strikes the same chord, keeping faith with the concept of apotheosis. It was in the aftermath of Augustus’ death that a senatorial decree ranked him amongst the gods (*divus Augustus*) and the ceremony of the apotheosis always took place (except in the case of megalomaniac emperors such as Caligula) after the death of the recipient.

Napoleon I is thus represented in the nude, which Antiquity usually reserved for gods, standing on a Roman chariot, being carried away towards the Olympian heavens. It is widely acknowledged that the Second Empire took great care over placing itself in the wake of the First and an artwork such as this is testimony to just that.

b) The use of an emblematic figure as a pretext (vehicle)

The reference to Antiquity can be used as a vehicle to express a modern allegory. We shall select one example: the Greek poetess, Sapho was chosen by many romantic and symbolist artists to be the emblematic figure of “poetry” and more generally of “artistic creativity”.

1. James Pradier (1780-1852): *Sapho*, marble statue, 1852
Location: ground floor, central aisle

From the end of the 18th century to the end of the 19th century, no female Classical figure enjoyed such a growing vogue as Sapho. However, the aspect of the 6th century BC Greek poetess’ life which most inspired artists, was her suicide.

According to the legend, Sapho threw herself from the top of the rock in Leucade out of love for the beautiful Phaon by whom she had been rejected. In this respect Pradier’s contemporaries found his statue enigmatic as the only reference to the young woman’s watery demise are the sculpted wavelets on the base. Instead, the viewer’s attention is drawn to the lyre lying to the right of the character: its sound chamber, sculpted in the shape of a tortoise shell, and its bronze strings are of an imposing size, confirming its major importance.

Distancing himself from anecdotal banality that would exteriorise Sapho’s despair, the sculptor created an atmosphere of interiority by animating his work with a sort of circular movement. Above all, Pradier wanted his statue to be a meditative figure, a symbol of artistic creation and melancholy, which, according to the romantics, are inseparable.

c) The reference to Antiquity in heroic landscape painting: its abandon and the birth of pastoral landscape

1. Camille Corot (1796-1875): *One Morning. The Dance of the Nymphs*, 1851, oil on canvas
Location: ground floor, gallery 6

Although a number of Corot’s landscapes are still peopled with the small figures of Classical tradition, he was also involved with the experimental Barbizon School. This was a group of artists who, selecting the village of Barbizon as their centre, roamed the Fontainebleau forest, preferring to paint out of doors, “sur le motif”, no longer considering it necessary to refer to Antique subjects in order to justify their interest in nature. This abandoning of mythological pretexts



1. Moulin : *Secret d'en-haut*, 1879
2. Galbrunner : *Napoléon III*, 1866
3. David : *Apothéose de Napoléon I^{er}*, 1861-1874
4. Pradier : *Sapho*, 1852
5. Corot : *Une matinée. La danse des nymphes*, 1851

constituted one of the elements in the birth of realist landscape painting: nature itself could become the subject of the painting, its role had shifted from that of decor to that of actor. In *One Morning. The Dance of the Nymphs*, the line of trees separating the characters from the background has the same function as a theatre curtain and evokes an opera ballet, an ambiguity confirmed by the title, “*Une matinée*” signifying both morning and an early performance. Yet the velvety and fluffy treatment of the foliage, so characteristic of Corot’s work, testifies to the shift in the artist’s interests from the narrated scene to the natural elements themselves. This tendency can be seen in other works such as *A clearing in Ville d’Avray*, where the young woman sitting in the shaft of light of the clearing, is only discreetly identifiable as the huntress Diana, her bow lying at her feet while the deer runs away in the distance. The title no longer includes the mythological allusion, and there is only a small step to take before all references to Antiquity disappear, giving way to pastoral landscape painting, and anticipating the experiments of the future impressionists.

Part Three: the “return to the Antique” (end of the 19th century and first years of the 20th)

1. Emile-Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929):
Heracles Killing the Birds of Lake Stymphale, 1909
Location: middle level, Lille terrace

Rodin, who had been Bourdelle’s teacher, was no stranger to using references to Antiquity for their enabling qualities. In his sculpted group *Faun and Nymph*, (Musée d’Orsay), he used figures overflowing with the dark forces of nature, to personify the climax of desire and resistance in a scene that is almost a representation of a rape. Bourdelle proceeded in a similar manner with his Heracles in which he avoided narrative or anecdotal elements connected with the legend of the twelve labours, and instead sought to symbolise strength and balance, a perfection of gestures, all the quintessential features of a male hero. The character is thus endowed with allegorical strength, without in any way prejudicing its formal modernity.

2. Kerr-Xavier Roussel (1867-1944):
The abduction of Leucippe’s Daughters, 1911
Location: middle level, gallery 70

The subject of this painting was taken from book XXXII of the *Idylls* by the Greek pastoral poet Theocritus: Castor and Pollux, the Dioscuri (sons of Zeus), the inseparable, duel nature twins (Castor was mortal and Pollux, divine), eloped with the daughters of their uncle Leucippe (the Leucippides), who were engaged to other cousins. The abduction was to have dire consequences: in the following battle, Castor was killed, but Zeus granted Pollux’ request that his brother also be

immortalised: they became the constellation of Gemini.

Roussel has chosen an episode early on in the tale, when life was still calm: the Dioscuri, in the distance, catch a glimpse of the young girls bathing. The treatment of the two female nudes in the foreground places the work in the tradition of pastoral painting. The matt colours of the flesh tones echo the subdued range of colours used by the artist in the landscape. But the small touch of pure red that reveals the presence of the two brothers enlivens the whole, hinting at the action to come. In a work which seems at first to be essentially decorative, Roussel succeeds in discreetly but efficiently introducing the Classical tale’s sequence of events: this heightened red that contrasts with the rest of the painting, accentuated by the white bush from which it emerges, leads the gaze of the viewer along with those of the Leucippides, towards a point that includes a sense of depth in this mostly frontal composition.

3. Odilon Redon (1840-1916): *Apollo’s Chariot*, 1905-1914, paint and pastel on canvas
Location: upper level, gallery 40

For a powerful visionary such as Odilon Redon the reference to Antiquity was not only a tool for the expression of his personal artistic vocabulary and for structuring the poetical space of the canvas, but it also occupied his imagination. The subject of *Apollo’s Chariot* thus held a privileged place in Redon’s work and while studying Delacroix’s composition in the Apollo Gallery of the Louvre he wrote: “This is the triumph of light against darkness, the joy of full day against the sadness of night and shadows, like the relief of feeling better after anguish” (*À soi-même*, Paris, 1922).

Before and after the visit

Suggestions to help teachers prepare for and get the most out of their visit to the Musée d’Orsay:

- familiarise the pupils with the modes of representation of mythological or historic figures in Classical art, for instance by organising a visit to the department of Greek and Roman antiquities at the Louvre.
- study the various “returns to Antiquity” which have recurred in the history of Western art: the Renaissance, 17th century Classicism, Davidian Neoclassicism...
- study the history of archaeology as a science (its methods and consequences), from its beginnings to the present day.
- focus on a particular theme in Antiquity; its history, literature or mythology, and have pupils carry out a project on how the representation of that theme has evolved, from Antiquity to the 20th century.



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