

## Mythology in the Cottonian Collection

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Hello everyone and welcome to Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery. My name is Liv and I'm an Art History student at Plymouth University. I am part of the Young Explainers group and that's why I'm here today. Young Explainers is a volunteer group made up of University students from different subjects, who are interested in history, research and art. We work together to research collections or exhibitions in order to show the public what the museum has to offer. This year we were given the chance to work with the Cottonian Collection. Today I will be focusing mainly on the mythological aspects that feature in the collection, with relation to some of the sculptures found in the gallery - particularly those that I personally found interesting, and also some that have the more exciting stories.

The collection features various sculptures, predominantly bronze or plaster copies, and some additional terracotta pieces. Like most art, the sculptures have found their inspiration from history, most obviously mythology from Ancient Greece and Rome.

But why was mythology such a fascinating subject to the eighteenth century gentry, such as Charles Rogers, who amassed these vast and impressive collections? One cause was the development of the new science of archaeology. In the eighteenth century there was a concentrated effort to preserve and revive civilizations of the past, and this was a starting point. Newly excavated dig sites with remains such as temples, frescoes, and sculptures, were soon being sketched, and these illustrations circulated around Europe, sparking interest in these ancient relics. Travel journals, such as James 'Athenian' Stuart and Nicholas Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* published in 1762, opened up this world to the general public, and encouraged interest in the ancient societies. The spread of curiosity with Roman art was most definitely advanced through the Grand Tour.

The Grand Tour was like a rite of passage for young wealthy men, who spent between one and four years travelling Europe. It was designed to broaden their knowledge of politics, history, and the arts. William Cotton III, for example – the Cotton who donated this collection to the city of Plymouth – went on the Grand Tour. Because there were very few museums in Europe at this time, people often had to gain access to private collections in order to view paintings and sculptures, and this made them want to collect their own paintings and sculptures to take back with them to create their own private collections. This desire to recreate ancient Rome back home is also the reason we have so many country homes with tall columns and niches designed to hold statues. It was this ability to go to Italy and see the artefacts first hand that led to their increased popularity, and this was visible in the style of artwork that began to be produced. The term we give to these types of work is neoclassical, which literally means 'new classicism', or a return of classical

values, and was most prolific in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

I personally take a great interest in the idea of the Gods, so I will be focusing more on them throughout the talk, giving you an idea of what exactly their role was, and some interesting information and stories that help us to understand why the sculptures would have been so inspired by the idea of myths and the powers of the gods.

Some of the sculptures are copies of Greek sculpture and some are copies made by the Romans. Later copyists may portray the same person or god, but assign them a different name. This is the idea of dual names in Classical Mythology, the Romans converted the original Greek god's names. We have here a bronze copy of Hermes and a plaster copy of Mercury. Both are the same God, who carry out the same role in both Greek and Roman Mythology. This will also apply to other gods that I will be talking about, such as Aphrodite or Venus. Original copies that would have been made of marble or bronze were usually a lot more colourful than the statues we see today. The sculptures would have been decorated in vibrant colours but unfortunately the colours have washed away throughout the years. These sculptures were placed in the gardens or houses of emperors or of the rich, such as the original Antinous sculpture that was found in the Roman emperor Hadrian's mausoleum. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the copies would have been much smaller and less colourful than the originals, probably because of the influence of The Grand Tour. People wanted copies that they were able to display easily in their houses.

I'm going to start with Hermes (known as Mercury in Roman Mythology) as he features a few times in the collection and is one of the more widely known Gods. Some people here may know him as 'the messenger god' or one of many of Zeus' sons. That story depicts Hermes as mischievous and also musical. He is known for inventing the Syrinx (pan pipes) and also the flute. His mother was the nymph, Maia. One version of Hermes birth is of him being born on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia, just as dawn broke. His mother wrapped him in swaddling bands but the feisty newborn wriggled free and ran off to Thessaly, where his brother Apollo lived. Whilst in Thessaly, Hermes stole Apollo's cattle, before returning himself to Mount Cyllene and wrapping himself back up in his bands. Apollo accused Hermes of this theft, but Maia refused to believe it. Zeus stepped in and made the truth clear. During the ensuing argument, Hermes hid his lyre (like a Greek harp) and succeeded in winning over Zeus as a result. Hermes then got to keep Apollo's cattle in return for the lyre.

Hermes is usually depicted with his famous winged sandals that he uses to fly down to the mortals from Mount Olympus (home of the Gods and Goddesses). He basically does all the work and running around for Zeus, helping or hindering any of the mortals that Zeus has his eye on. In this role as messenger he will have completed thousands of errands and tasks for Zeus, who favoured lucky individuals such as Odysseus. *The Odyssey* is the most famous Greek epic and definitely a very interesting one. It revolves

around the journey of the warrior Odysseus making his very long journey back to his home and family in Ithaca. You may also know Odysseus as the brains behind the Trojan Horse.

Homer's epic *Odyssey* best portrays him in his role as a messenger god. When Odysseus is in danger of being lured and turned into a pig by the sorceress Circe, Hermes comes to his aid in the form of a man (as mortals cannot see Gods in their real form). Hermes tells Odysseus to eat the herb Moly in order to protect himself from Circe's drug and then to lunge at her with his sword. This message from Hermes meant that Odysseus was able to save his men and become the hero he is well known as.

That is a more common portrayal of Hermes, but the bronze copy we have here in the collection depicts Hermes in a different role. He has a cloak draped over his shoulder in this particular piece and that leads us to believe that this is Hermes portrayed in his well-known role of a Psychopomp, a character that guides dead souls into the underworld. We think this is the role he is in here because in other pieces of ancient Greek art Hermes is also depicted in this cloak, sometimes associated with this role.

Another Olympian that features in this collection is the Goddess Venus (who is also known as Aphrodite in Greek mythology). When people think of this particular Goddess the first thing that comes to mind is love, yet she is also the Goddess of sex, beauty, fertility and prosperity, making her a very desirable Goddess. Her desirability is expressed in sculptures or paintings of her. The sculpture we have here in Plymouth is a perfect example of this. The female figure is beautiful and desirable as she sits in a peaceful pose, effortlessly adorned in drapery. She has no weapons or armor to show that she is a fighter like Athena. She is chaste and desirable.

One story that showcases Venus' power and capability is the judgment of Paris. At the marriage celebration for Achilles' parents Peleus and Thetis, the Goddess of discord Eris was not invited and so decided to make some mischief. She threw a golden apple into the festivities and said "for the fairest one". Three goddesses, Minerva, Juno and Venus all claimed the fruit. The Goddesses asked Zeus to judge them, but he was reluctant. So they then turned to a mortal judge, Paris, who they bribed with their immortal powers. Minerva offered Paris wisdom and skill in war, Venus offered him the world's most beautiful woman, and Juno offered to make him king of Europe and Asia. If everyone has read some epic literature or tragedy – or seen Troy – we know that Venus was picked and so Paris won Helen of Sparta. Venus/Aphrodite was thereby deemed the fairest of the Goddesses.

Mythology has a great way of intertwining and spiraling off into other stories. We have in this collection a painting by Giovanni Francesco Romanelli called *Helen Carried off by Theseus*. I feel that this painting has a very obvious link to the mythology, not only indicated by its title but also by the classical nature of the painting. You can see in the background traditional Greek architecture, with volute pillar bases and also what looks like a modern perception of what he thought Greek clothing would look like. The title suggests that this is the

Helen of Troy, commonly known for being the most beautiful woman in the world. Her beauty is probably why different men in art and literature are always carrying her off! The painting portrays Helen being carried off for the first time by Theseus, who is supposed to have kidnapped her because he wanted to make love to a daughter of Zeus before he died. There is more information about this painting in the guide.

Venus also has a central role in Virgil's Roman epic, *The Aeneid*. Virgil wrote the epic in honour of the emperor of the time, Augustus. Flattering him with the praises of Augustus' ancestor Aeneas, who is, according to legend, the ancestor of Romulus and Remus – the founding brothers of Rome. Some of you may also know the story of Romulus, who founds Rome after murdering his twin brother Remus. Parts of the book have snippets of the wonders of the Gods and other magical existences. From reading *The Aeneid* I have come to understand that it is about the praises of Rome and its loyalty to the Gods. Virgil never finished the epic and didn't want it published, but Augustus made sure that it was and this is why the entire book boosts Augustus' and Rome's ego. As well as being the 'perfect Roman' guide book, it also contains the excitement of love, war and the gods.

From reading *The Aeneid*, I recognise Venus as the mother of Aeneas. In *The Aeneid*, Venus essentially flirts with her son Aeneas and is really rather mischievous. Her son Aeneas goes out hunting with his friend Achates when they stumble across a beautiful young huntress wearing knee high boots that reveal her knees, which was actually a very flirtatious thing to do. Her son asks who she is but she suggests that she is just a mortal hunting girl. She tells Aeneas what he is destined to do and who he is destined to meet. When she turns to leave, her son catches her out and recognizes her as his mum. Only a Goddess would manage to entice and flirt with her own son.

As well as the sculptures in this collection, the Cottonian Collection also boasts some oil paintings that are mythological. Earlier I mentioned to you Romanelli's *Helen Carried off by Theseus*. This is not the only painting that made me think of mythology, there are two other paintings I'd like to talk about. Maria Anna Angelica Kauffman's *Beauty Yielded to Love, Quitted by Prudence* and *Beauty Tempted by Love, Counselling by Prudence* - both made between 1741-1807. What made me connect these two paintings to mythology was the appearance of cupid in both. The paintings also attracted my attention because of the allegorical characters of Love and Beauty - those things attract my personality.

I don't know many people who haven't heard of Cupid or don't know of his iconography. When people think of Cupid they might first think of the chubby baby of Venus who has wings, but he is actually supposed to be a young boy. This appearance is what he is usually portrayed as, and this is what we can see in the Cottonian's paintings. We see him with his iconic bow and arrow, which are his weapons of his power: anyone he shoots with his arrow is supposed to be overcome with desire and lust. He was a popular subject in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Again the Gods merge together in stories, one story I know that contains Cupid and his mother Venus comes again from *The Aeneid*. Venus disguises her son Cupid and sends him to the palace of Dido, Queen of Carthage. Cupid was under the instructions to remove Dido's memory of love for her previous husband and replace it with love for Aeneas. This is all part of Venus' plan to get the upper hand on Juno who wants Dido to harm Aeneas and stop him from reaching Rome. Venus hopes that by making Dido love Aeneas, Venus will be able to control her. When the gods work together they can do as they will. This may be why artists are so infatuated with the myths and Gods - because their powers are an exciting subject to play with.

Angelica Kauffman's paintings are interesting for another reason. Kauffman herself was a remarkable woman: there were very few female painters in the eighteenth century, as painting was deemed a male profession, so it's impressive she was successful at all against such opposition. Remarkably, along with only one other woman, she was one of the founding members of the Royal Academy. Women weren't allowed to take life classes as it was considered inappropriate for women to see a naked man, so she created her own style of painting that usually focused on women from history, and Goddesses from Greek and Roman myth, hence the subject of her paintings.

The interesting part of Kauffman's work is her use of allegory. The National Gallery defines allegory as 'the description of a subject in the guise of another subject'. This is either used as a figure symbolizing an emotion, such as greed or love, such as we have here, or other abstract states such as revolution, or beauty, again, as we have here. In terms of mythology, Gods and Goddesses were often used to represent traits, for example Venus or Aphrodite represent love, Mercury or Hermes that we were talking about earlier, the messenger God, would represent speed. In order to understand allegorical paintings, you must first identify the figure, and then interpret what they're symbolizing. Allegorical paintings were popular from the Renaissance right up to the 1800s.

What I love about Mythology, as I've already mentioned, is that everything is always connected. The Gods and mortals are one big family. Their stories are constantly intertwining, making the myths and stories packed full of interesting ideas. These are personally some stories and facts that I find interesting. The links between the Gods in the tales helps to identify mythology in the collection that we have here. There are countless myths and epics including these Gods and more. It's no wonder that these sculptors and artists were so inspired by the myth, from the vast amounts of statues or paintings that were influenced by the Gods or mythology. It all helps us to understand why they have influenced artists.