THE ODYSSEY AND ANCIENT ART:
AN EPIC IN WORD AND IMAGE

New Exhibit at Bard’s Edith C. Blum Art Institute traces artistic influence of Homer’s heroic saga

For centuries after the Greek poet Homer created the Odyssey, ancient Greek and Roman cultures found inspiration in the adventures of its heroic protagonist, Odysseus, King of Ithaca. The artists of Homer’s time, and of the periods that followed, expressed this inspiration through exquisitely rendered images depicting these fantastic adventures on objects both utilitarian and decorative. On Saturday, October 6th, the Edith C. Blum Art Institute at Bard College opened “The Odyssey and Ancient Art: An Epic in Word and Image,” an extraordinary exhibit of more than 60 ancient Greek and Roman objects portraying characters and scenes from Homer’s classic work, some seen in this country for the first time.

The objects in the exhibit — sculptures, vases, plaques, coins, scarabs, lamps and mirrors from the 6th century B.C. through the 2nd century A.D. — have been selected by curators Diana Buitron and Beth Cohen from the world’s preeminent collections of ancient art: The Art Museum, Princeton University; Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard; Ashmolean Museum, London; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Musee du Louvre, Paris; Duke University Art Museum and many others. Drs. Buitron and Cohen chose these works not only for their ability to display the strength and influence of Homer’s classical tale, but also as a means to inform viewers about the social values, daily life, military practices and religious beliefs of those who participated in Homer’s own and subsequent cultures. As displayed in “The Odyssey and Ancient Art,” these objects are intended to speak to museumgoers as visual comments, surviving voices from ancient times whose narratives mutually convey the glories of ancient art and ancient literature.

Buitron and Cohen have organized

OUR COVER

the objects in the exhibit not by date of manufacture or similarity of function, as is often done, but by following the narrative of the Odyssey — grouping together images of Polyphemus with scenes of Odysseus offering a bowl of wine, or his escape from the cave; images of Circe, the Underworld, the sirens, of Skylla; Odysseus in Ithaca; the slaughter of the suitors. Shown in this fashion, the exhibit allows viewers to pay attention both to the formal and stylistic elements of the objects and to their narrative aspects; to see the them not just in historical and archaeological perspective but also in the context of Homer's epic.

“The Odyssey and Ancient Art”

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opened on Sunday, October 6th, with a performance titled “From Odysseus to Ulysses: Fantastic Voyages, Seduction, and Domestic Dramas.” The performance, which was opened to the public free of charge, featured Bard College faculty in dramatized readings of Homer’s Odyssey and a selection of other dramatic texts it inspired, including works by Euripides, Virgil, Petronius, Lucian, Dante Alighieri, John Milton, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, James Joyce and Wallace Stevens.

On February 1st, the female side of this mythic journey will be explored when the Edith C. Blum Institute at Bard hosts a symposium, held in conjunction with “The Odyssey and Ancient Art,” titled “The Female Figures of
Kothon, Greek
Attic black-figure
Mid 6th century B.C.
Warriors
Collection, The Walters Art Gallery,
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Homer’s Odyssey: Goddesses, Monsters, and Women.” Participants and their topics will include: Richard Brilliant, Professor of Art History and Archaeology, Anna S. Garbedian Professor in the Humanities, Columbia University, speaking on “Circe’s Men: Swine and Sweethearts”; Lillian E. Doherty, Department of Classics, University of Maryland, on “Sirens, Muses, and Female Narrators in the Odyssey”; Helen Peet Foley, Olin Professor of Classics, Barnard College, on “Penelope as Moral Agent”; Alan Shapiro, Associate Professor of Humanities, Department of Classics, Stevens Institute of Technology, on “Coming of Age in Phaeacia: The Meeting of Nausicaa and Odysseus”; Jennifer Neils, Associate Professor and chairman, Department of Art, Case Western Reserve University, on “Les Femmes Fatales: Scylla and the Sirens of Greek Art”; Christine Havelock, Professor Emerita, Department of Art, Vassar College, on
Red-figure stamnos
Greek, Anic
Attributed to the Siren painter
Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship
listening to the sirens
Early 5th Century B.C.
Terracotta
The British Museum, London

“The Intimate Act of Foot Washing: A Sculptor’s Interpretation”; A. John Graham, Department of Classical Studies, University of Pennsylvania on “The Odyssey, Women and History”; and Froma Zeitlin, Department of Classics, Princeton, on “Themes of Women’s Fidelity and Adultery.” The curators, Dr. Diana Buitron and Dr. Beth Cohen, will moderate. Registration for the symposium is required by January 15, 1992.

“The Odyssey and Ancient Art: An Epic in Word and Image” will be on exhibit at the Edith C. Blum Art Institute, Bard College, until March 1, 1992. Gallery hours are 12–5 p.m. daily, closed Tuesdays.

“The Odyssey and Ancient Art,” originated at The Edith C. Blum Art Institute, is funded by The Edith C. Blum Foundation, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on The Arts.

The Edith C. Blum Art Institute was founded in 1981 as an ongoing exhibition space and educational resource for the Milton and Sally Avery Center for the Arts at Bard College.