

Masters And Champions, Classical Greece: 300 Years of British Inspiration

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Moray Art Centre, Findhorn, until 26 August 2012

MORAY Art Centre's latest exhibition successfully shifts the centre of cultural gravity to the North East in its innovative approach to the reinterpretation of key works of art from public and private collections.

THIS unique collaboration between key partners – MAC, The British Museum and Lord Elgin, The Earl of Elgin and Kincardine, KT – has resulted in an inspiring and provocative show. The exhibition includes 5th to 3rd Century BC Greek Sculpture, 19th century British drawings and paintings from The British Museum and the private collection of Lord Elgin, featuring works never exhibited before.



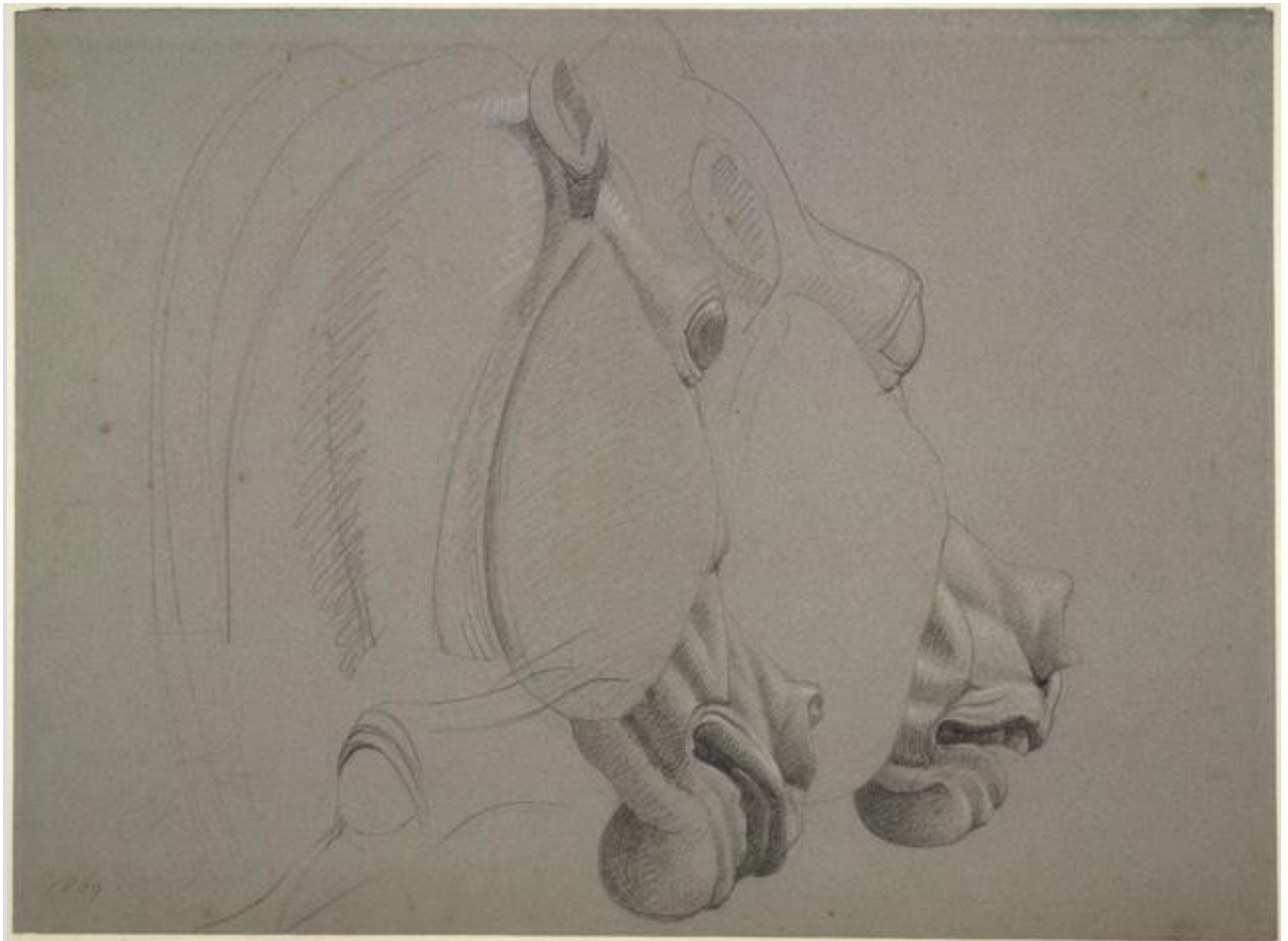
View of the Taranto Horse (© British Museum)

Masters and Champions expands the frame of reference of its original material to an extraordinary degree. The extensive programme of talks, events and workshops that accompany it provide multiple points of entry for a variety of different age groups and levels of interest. The vision and ethos of Moray Art Centre is pivotal in its innovative approach. This is not just an isolated display of art objects but an exploration of the context and meaning of these works, both historical and contemporary, with talks by Dr Ian Jenkins, OBE FSA, Senior

Curator, Department of Greece and Rome, British Museum, a personal reflection by Lord Elgin, and Professor Elizabeth A. Moignard, Classical Greek Scholar, University of Glasgow.

The education programme also offers an entire spectrum of hands-on engagement with the content of the exhibition through sport, drawing, pewter casting, clay modelling, mono printing, film making, theatre, basket and mask making. It would be difficult to find such a far reaching programme in support of a major exhibition in Glasgow, Edinburgh or London.

An Inspire project of the London 2012 Games, the exhibition draws inspiration from the original Olympic Games as a holistic celebration of the arts and sport. Focusing on the horse as a symbol of heroism and status and the influence of Classicism in British culture, *Masters and Champions* creates a fascinating dialogue between works from the ancient world and the Enlightenment. The opportunity for audiences across the North East to experience this work in an intimate setting and the perspectives of each of the exhibition partners has created very fertile ground for contemplation and debate.



Haydon's Two Views of the Head of the Horse of Selene From The East Pediment of The Parthenon (© British Museum)

The most compelling element of the show is its contemporary relevance; a history of ideas lived visually which still influences politics, art, architecture, drama, theatre, poetry, philosophy and sporting activity today. The

exhibition will culminate with Young Athenians (1 September – 6 October), a showcase of work by contemporary artists in response to the architecture of Scotland’s capital and the idea of the “Athens of the North.”

What really fires the imagination is resoundingly the works themselves. The *Cast of Selene’s Horse* from the far east corner of the Parthenon pediment with its raw, muscular energy and sublime elegance is a magnificent example. From every angle this fragment of the original conveys absolute understanding and reverence towards the subject, together with complete command of the sculptor’s chosen material. Viewing this single head up close in a way that would not be possible in its original architectural position, the horse becomes a powerful physical presence and a progression of ideas that are as aspirational today as in the time the work was created.

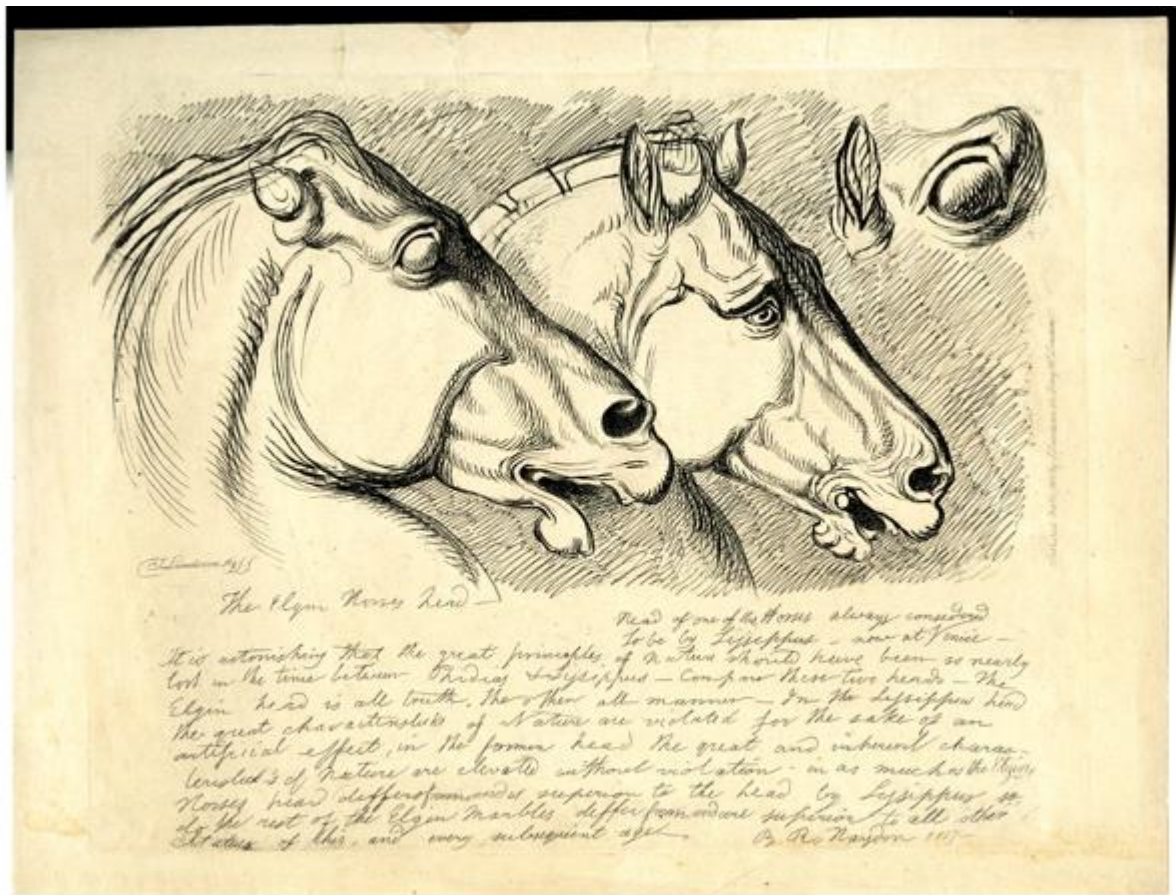
The observational detail of the Parthenon sculptures elevates appreciation of the physical to sacred height. Drawing the moon Goddess’s chariot, this head radiates life in its sheer physicality; the tendons of the neck, flared nostrils and panting breath, animal and divine. The *Marble Head of a Horse* (Western Greek, Made in Taranto c.350-300BC) brings the viewer closer still to the wellspring in its sensitive rendering of tension in movement; veins coursing through marble, puckered skin around the mouth reigned by the sculptor’s admiration and supreme craftsmanship. This isn’t just the representational modelling of a horse at the birth of the Western Art Tradition, but a human mind perceiving the idea and essence of that animal; alive in three dimensions, timelessly potent in its physicality and an agent of transformation in the act of seeing.



Another view of the Taranto Horse (© British Museum)

What is so awe inspiring in both Selene's Horse and the Taranto Horse is what British Museum Director Neil Macgregor describes as the transformation of "cold marble into warm flesh". They are immediately tactile, they speak of creative energy, Apollonian and Dionysian impulses, inspiring appreciation of the original source of the Western Art Tradition, contemplation of Civilization, Enlightenment and what a "Golden Age" might mean in contemporary times. Whatever associative meanings the viewer might bring to the work, the essential spark is in seeing them; an experience that in emotional terms reminds us of what it is to be human and why we need Art in the first place.

The truth and authenticity of the Elgin Marbles brought to Britain by Thomas, 7th Earl of Elgin, felt by artists such as Benjamin Robert Haydon and John Henning in the early 1800's, is still undeniable today. Though the removal of the sculptures from their original site remains contentious, arguably this controversial act preserved them, significantly as Art objects. When these works first landed on British shores the effect was sensational and standing in the Moray Art Centre's temporary exhibition or in the halls of the British Museum it still is.



Landseer after Haydon etching (© British Museum)

One of the most intriguingly beautiful responses to this ancient work is expressed in the etching; *Study Of The Horse's Head From The East Pediment Of The Parthenon And Of The Head Of One Of The Horses Of St Mark's Basilica, Venice* (1817) by Landseer after Haydon. Benjamin Robert Haydon's original text below his drawing invites the viewer to compare the two heads; "...it is astonishing that the principle of nature should have been so nearly lost in the time between Phidias and Lysippus"..."The Elgin head is all truth. The other all manner".

Haydon takes a stab at contemporary taste and the establishment but what he also illustrates visually in the juxtaposition of these two heads links powerfully to the adjacent sculptures in the exhibition; the perceived truth, authenticity and authority represented by the Parthenon sculptures and their enduring appeal to the human psyche.



Fragment of Marble Votive (© British Museum)

When Haydon describes “the great and inherent characteristics of nature” exemplified by the Parthenon sculptures he is also alluding to the aspirational qualities of human nature. Arguably Haydon’s visual revolution has its roots in the transformative power of material experience in seeing this work which can still be felt by the contemporary viewer. Both the etching by Landseer after Haydon and the exquisite contours of Haydon’s *Two Views of the Head of the Horse of Selene From The East Pediment Of The Parthenon* (1809) are compelling visual essays in themselves. They also document a very human response to this ancient work and inspire curiosity about an artist who for many will be unfamiliar.

Like the drawing of the Parthenon pediment East Side, Section D by Scots Enlightenment artist John Henning, the entire exhibition feels very much like the linear definition of humanity resurfacing out of a delicate ground of washes; the emergence of an idea and its evolution into an aesthetic of Neo-Classicism, taste and symbol, Beauty and idealism. Whatever values we attribute to Classicism and its visual incarnations throughout the ages; sanitised by Roman copies, domesticated by Wedgwood or gracing the facades of our financial institutions, the figure in this drawing reclining upon an animal skin is almost certainly Dionysos. The exhibition is an important

touchstone in relation to the archetypal nature of visual language in defining who we are as human beings and who we aspire to be, individually and collectively.

The imaginative scale of *Masters and Champions* is both mental and physical; from John Henning's miniature plaster casts of the Parthenon Frieze, to paintings, drawings and ancient sculptural fragments which imply a universal frame of reference. It is the human architecture of this show that impresses in terms of concept and content. The reception and interpretation of this source material and the questions it raises about "aesthetic ambition" in our own time is a compelling line of enquiry posed by Moray Art Centre Founder and Director Randy Klinger and by the visual content of the exhibition. In the depth and breadth of its vision and in the context of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad Moray Art Centre is a beacon.

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