

# Known Unknowns

Troy, myth and reality: British Museum

Robin Richmond, November 23, 2019



*Judgment of Paris (after Rubens) Eleanor Antin, chromogenic print, 2007*  
*Crater: Achilles killing Penthesilea, Greek 530 BC*



*There are known knowns ; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns ; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know.*

Donald Rumsfeld, February 12, 2002

Like Atlantis, like Shangri La, like Arcadia, El Dorado and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Troy is an idea and a state of mind as much as a place. There is so much we don't know and probably will never know about Troy, but this dramatic, authoritative and beautiful exhibition – unlike so many others in these times of political uncertainty – answers many questions. Problems that have engaged archaeologists, experts in Homeric literature, classicists, historians, hokey Hollywood film directors and us mere tourists for many centuries are addressed in the winter blockbuster at the British Museum. The approach is subtle and nuanced. Lifting one's head up from the dramatically lit artefacts, wooden ribs evoking the Trojan horse float high above. The use of digital imagery, illustrating the historical record over thousands of years, works well here, unlike the National Gallery's Leonardo show – subject of my last blog. This show is more than the sum of its parts and can be understood by a child, and I hope many children will see it. Exhibitions should tell a story and this one tells a wonderfully rich one. It's dark and mysterious and a bit scary. It feels like a lucky dip into the swag bag of Indiana Jones.

This is the first major show about Troy ever mounted in the UK and features 300 objects and artefacts, ranging from finds from original archaeological

digs through mediaeval, Renaissance, Neo-Classical and even 21st century photographic work, all based on the idea of Troy. An eloquent contribution, in the form of accompanying text, from the charities *Crisis* and *Waterloo Uncovered* throw light upon issues that haunt us today. The spoils and horrors of war; the bloody conflict between nations; the tragedy of displaced persons; the diaspora that creates refugees; the blight that is homelessness; the suffering of human trafficking and the abuse of women, are themes that are uppermost in our minds right now. This is by no means a stretch by the curators and provides a timely and moving commentary.

The equivocal subtitle of the show points out the inherent ambiguity of history, leavened by doubt. The exhibition asks us whether we should believe in the plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. It questions the poetic histories of Cicero, Virgil, and Troy's greatest champion the blind poet Homer, and it posits the idea of an existential truth, that without dismissing it as fake news, places human truth alongside historical truth. The Greek myths of Helen of Troy, Achilles and his vulnerable heel, Odysseus and his epic journey, the flight of the Trojan chieftain Aeneas, ancestor of Romulus and Remus and son of the goddess Aphrodite fleeing Troy with his father Anchises on his back, all reveal so much about the stories and tragedies that we need to tell ourselves about our existence today. Even if you think Freud got it entirely wrong, it seems that myth is a useful construct that helps us understand our human reality.

Many questions are answered here at the British museum. Was there actually such a great city in the eastern Mediterranean? *Yes*. Was it truly built by the gods and peopled by heroes? *Sadly not*. Did the Trojan wars really happen? Little evidence for this. Was Helen's, as Christopher Marlowe says in *Dr. Faustus*, "the face that launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Ilium?" *Unlikely*. Was Helen of Sparta (as she should really be called) the daughter of Zeus and Leda and sister to Clytemnestra? *Hmm*. Did a huge army of Greek soldiers pour out from the belly of the fabled wooden horse, ending the 10-year war and recovering their kidnapped queen from Prince Paris of Troy? *No evidence of this at all*. Did Heinrich Schliemann, putative discoverer of Troy (known also as Ilios or Ilium) really find the lost city in 1873? *Sort of*. Part of it anyway.

It's complicated.

Legend and metaphor about Troy have fed our souls, minds, and imagination for centuries because as humans we are always hungry for a good story. Greek myths draw their narrative energy from this need. The very idea of this lost city of Troy and its magical numinous existence is part of this mythic quest. Although many soldiers died defending their lands over 3000 years ago, there were no weapons of mass destruction in use between Mycenae and Troy, as were invoked by Rumsfeld during the Gulf war. We do know that Troy existed, even if we don't know in what precise form. To this day Troy is shrouded in mystery and I, for one, am glad to say that "we know there are some things we do not know."