VISUAL IMPACT

BRIAN A. SPARKES

CLASSICAL ASSOCIATION
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Cover illustration by Neil Barrett, from a black-figure cup by Exekias showing the god Dionysus sailing triumphant in his ship

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VISUAL IMPACT

crede mihi; plus est, quam quod videatur, imago
Ovid, *Heroides* 13.155

As I walked out at the conclusion of Baroness Greenfield's Presidential Address in Leeds last year, an unknown voice whispered in my ear 'Follow that'. So here I am a year later, following that. But I have to warn you that I am not noted for serious lectures like that one; Charlie Chaplin is said to have remarked: 'Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long shot.'[1]

I

The roll call of past Presidents of the CA must give all their successors cause for apprehension, and I am no exception. To find myself holding the office of President is a humbling experience, and I am very grateful for this undeserved honour. I joined the CA shortly after I had taken my first degree, almost 50 years ago. The 1950s were enjoying what Chris Stray has called 'a kind of Indian summer for Classics'.[2] But let me take you back a little further before those years, then we will move into forward gear.

The name of Gilbert Murray is especially significant in the history of the Classical Association and its Presidency. When at school in the 6th form reading Classics, I came across a copy of Murray's 1897 book *A History of Ancient Greek Literature* in the school library, and to my astonishment my eye lit upon the 'notorious'[3] opening sentence in the preface (p. vii): 'To read and re-read the scanty remains now left to us of the literature of Ancient Greece, is a pleasant and not a laborious task... .' The words 'scanty remains', 'pleasant', and 'not laborious' were far from the phrases I would have chosen at that time. I was fine with my alpha and omega but I was having some difficulty

[1]Obituary in *The Guardian* 28 December 1977.
[2]Christopher Stray, 'A Lull between Two Storms: from the 1920s to the 1950s' in Christopher Stray (ed.), *The Classical Association: the First Century 1903-2003* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 40.
[3]How was I to know at that time, as Professor Fowler has informed me, that Henry Jackson had written 'Insolent puppy' in the margin of the book? See Isabel Henderson 'The Teacher of Greek' in *Gilbert Murray: an unfinished autobiography*, edited by Jean Smith and Arnold Toynbee (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1960), p. 133.

in distinguishing my *arsis* from my *thesis*. I was in the same position as the pupil who figured in an early number of *Didaskalos*.[4] In a short piece entitled 'Nine types of Editor' a pupil was seeking help from the notes at the back of an all too familiar type of school edition he was studying. The editor asks: Why is this subjunctive? The pupil answers: I haven't the remotest clue. If it is important for me to know, why not tell me?

Although I now realise what Murray meant in writing of 'scanty remains', I have still not read all of them, and I have found some that I have read a very 'laborious' task indeed. But my interest soon moved in a different direction towards the material remains of antiquity.

As an undergraduate at King's College London I was fortunate to be taught not only by Professor Winnington-Ingram but also by Professor Romilly Jenkins, then Koraes Professor of Modern Greek. In the 1930s he had been Senior Student at the British School at Athens during Humfry Payne's Directorship. He ran a course at King's on 'Greek Sculpture and Vase-Painting'. He was a brilliant lecturer and I was captivated. I rather think that this choice of special subject was not one totally acceptable to the staff of KCL Classics Department. They were rightly anxious that their students should learn more language through weekly Greek and Latin prose composition and read more literature, particularly the texts that made up the literary canon; we had no business looking at pretty pictures. It was an approach that I feel was characterised, if not caricatured, by an encounter I once had in the Classics corridor with the elderly lecturer giving a course on Sophocles. I was gently reprimanded for not attending his lectures. I tried to explain that I was not taking his course, but he failed to hear (or maybe listen to) my explanation. Without more ado I was benevolently dismissed with the flattering injunction 'Well, never mind, Sparkes – as long as you know the difference between Jebb's and Pearson's texts'. I later read E.R. Dodds, in his autobiography *Missing Persons*, call to mind his Mods Tutor in 1912 who 'saw the task of scholarship not as the reinterpretation of ancient masterpieces or the rediscovery of ancient modes of thought, but simply as the transmission of the most exact

[4] *Didaskalos* 3 (1965), pp. 165-7.

possible knowledge of two ancient languages'.[5] This was reiterated by Kenneth Dover in his *Marginal Comment* of ten years ago when he recalled a master at St Paul's in the 1930s who had 'an extraordinary understanding of the Greek language... . Curiously he did not seem to have much idea of what it was like to be a Greek engaged in any activity other than the use of language'.[6] It would be too much to say that nowadays many of those learning about the classical world know everything about the activities of the Greeks and Romans other than their use of languages, but sadly there is a germ of truth in it.

II

The classical landscape has altered considerably over the last fifty years. The mountain peaks of the literary giants are still there but they are climbed by fewer travellers; many stay in the foothills or take time on the way up to look around them. Some of the low-lying fog has lifted, new vistas have opened up, and explorers are moving in other directions, cutting back the undergrowth on the lower slopes and literally excavating territory that had previously been hidden from view. (You will be pleased to hear that I can't keep the metaphor going.) In the area of literary studies, tutors would have raised their hands in horror 50 years ago if one had shown a perverted interest in, say, Callimachus or Seneca's *Tragedies*; even Ovid was a suspect author. Had one thought the Greek or Latin novel worth taking off the shelf (even if there had been an edition there!), the disgrace would have been extreme. Nowadays the net is cast more widely. So it is also for students of ancient history. They are now encouraged to be more adventurous than before – we were not expected to progress much further than the decline of the polis or beyond the year of that motley crew, the Four Emperors. There has been a remarkable shift of focus in both teaching and learning – Greek prehistory, the Hellenistic East, Late Antiquity, with the introduction of such themes as economics, law, ethnicity, slavery, sexuality and gender, and those subjects that can only, it seems, be expressed in such French terms as *alterité* and *mentalités*. Historians of the classical world are now eager to investigate subjects for which our extant written texts offer precious little help. New literary works written on papyrus have been

[5]E. R. Dodds, *Missing Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 26-7.
[6]K. J. Dover, *Marginal Comment* (London: Duckworth, 1994), p. 34.

unearthed (and if our Chairman is successful, this number may soon rise), but they are at present few and far between; it is epigraphy which is providing the written substance that is able to transform historical research. New inscriptions have that welcome gift of overturning orthodoxy – they more often undermine history than underline it. This was memorably encapsulated in William Dinsmoor's dedication of his 1939 book *The Athenian Archon List in the Light of Recent Discoveries*:

> To KYDENOR, Athenian Archon in 243/2 B.C.,
> whose first inscription, discovered in 1923,
> disarranged all archon lists copied up to that time,
> and whose second inscription, discovered in 1938,
> disorganised all subsequent attempts at
> reorganization, this restudy of the problem is
> respectfully dedicated.

Needless to say, the dates of this elusive archon have moved yet again since then. And of course archaeology has become a major player in the field of study. Historians depend on the findings to help them expand and deepen their understanding of the classical world.

Nowadays students at whatever stage of their learning are less willing to read pre-digested accounts of their subject; for us Bury and Cary were required reading. Modern students now call for source books (or so publishers seem to think), usually in translation. They want as full a range of data as possible, and part of that evidence must be what the eyes see and the brain must aim to interpret. Ernst Curtius' remark in 1948 that 'Knowing pictures is easy compared with knowing books'[7] would today be less readily accepted. Since 1948 the visual and material elements in the classical world have taken on a much more prominent role. Ancient Greece and Rome can no longer be viewed solely through a textual filter. We demand to see them in as rounded a view as possible, accompanied by the monuments, artefacts and clothing of their everyday lives and in the context of their landscape and built environment. Both the Greeks and the Romans were steeped in visual cultures – the setting in which they lived, moved and had their being and their quietus, whether in

[7]Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. from the German by Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 15.

city, country, sanctuary or cemetery, was imbued with powerful images that had more effect on their lives than the writings of their authors, given the restricted literacy of the majority. Public rituals and games, processions and parades were accompanied by varieties of images, and the whole scene was alive with actions, noise, dress and colour. If we want to understand and appreciate the classical world and to put their writings into context, we cannot omit to consider the material and visual dimensions. An understanding of the classical world is not confined to textual exegesis or literary investigation; the very strength of our subject is based on the diversity of our sources.

III

I now wish to consider the phenomenon of the growth of the interest in and use of material culture in classical studies over the past 50 years from three different viewpoints. Let us begin with serious research.

With the importance given to teaching in universities scandalously marginalised and the RAE driving the agenda, the amount of research being produced is frighteningly voluminous, part of that information explosion with which we are bombarded. Within this research output the proportion devoted to the visual aspects of classical antiquity is much larger than in the past, and it is very different from the traditional work on visual evidence carried out a generation or so ago when aesthetics and style, particularly Greek, were paramount and the art-historical approach was the foremost way of studying the material. The traditional approach has by no means been abandoned and indeed is still vigorous, but the visual evidence is now examined from more varied perspectives than before, whether for itself or for evidence in building up a larger picture. Let me highlight a few of the main viewpoints from which the subject is now being explored.

One major difference from the earlier investigations lies in the chronological and geographical spread of the material now studied. As with classical history, so with visual and material culture, there has been an enlargement of view with the Ancient Near East, Africa and the Celtic fringe given their due measure. I have chosen to highlight an example from the Late Antique period. A recent book

entitled *Classics in Progress*, published in 2002 and edited by Peter Wiseman, celebrated the centenary of the British Academy. In its own words it presents 'an idea of the range and vitality of classical scholarship in the twenty-first century'. It contrasts strongly with the 1954 volume entitled *Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship*, published by Blackwells and edited by Maurice Platnauer, which coincided with the Golden Jubilee of this Association. As defined by the contents of the Platnauer volume, classical scholarship was identified with literary genres; the Wiseman volume happily covers a much wider spectrum. On the dust jacket of the new book there is a portrait head (**Fig. 1**) which one cannot imagine being chosen 50 years ago as a

Fig. 1.
Head of Eutropius, from Ephesus, ca. AD 475. Total ht. 0.295 m.

cover to illustrate a book on classical scholarship. This is the head of a certain Eutropius, part of a public monument erected to him along one of the major streets of Ephesus and dated to the latter part of the 5th century AD. It rested above an inscription which recalled his ceaseless labours (his *philagrypnoi mochthoi*) in arranging for the paving of the city's streets with marble. The traditional interpretation of his elongated, two-dimensional appearance has been to emphasise the increased religiosity of an emerging Christian world – it has been indeed considered a 'soul portrait', figuring, in Ernst Kitzinger's words, 'the consuming intensity of one man's awareness of the supernatural world'.[8] By contrast, recent studies of this and similar Late Antique portraits approached from a classical perspective have emphasised that the appearance of the face embodies the social ideal of the time – values of austerity, dignity and uncompromising honesty – the rectitude of a worthy citizen of the local élite, not his concentration on the world beyond.

Let us take a different context in which the visual images of the Roman Empire have recently been used to advertise Classics. Under the title 'Tempora Mutantur' in *Oxford Today* a couple of years ago, the Classics Faculty at Oxford demonstrated to potential students the work being carried out within the Faculty by fronting the article with an image of a mummy portrait from Roman Egypt (**Fig. 2**). There was a time when likenesses such as these were dismissed as poor provincial products, hardly worth a second look; but they are now being intensively studied and appreciated for their humanity, and for the evidence they give of the social, religious and funerary background of the time. (Naturally, any student using the Cambridge Latin Course would have met a selection of these before applying.)

The need to see both Eutropius and the mummy portraits in context highlights another major strand of modern study in the visual culture of classical antiquity. The universal relevance of classical art is now less emphasised than previously; we are less interested in absolutes than we were, and the transcendence of the classical, alongside the social superiority of those studying it, has become something of a background consideration. To concentrate on the aesthetic effect of a statue such as the early classical youth

[8]Ernst Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 80.

Fig. 2.
Mummy portrait,
2nd century AD.
Ht. 0.38 m.

excavated at the Carthaginian site of Motya in western Sicily (**Fig. 3**) is rightly seen as a severe reduction in our understanding of its purpose and meaning. Statues were on public display – they were in modern terms 'culture-specific'; they were not erected for the art-lover or the connoisseur. They had a job to do, a part to play in the life of society. It was through such images that social, religious and political messages were conveyed to the general public, and the statues were expressive and functional components of their own time. The motive for production was not in the hands of the artists; they served society, they did not stand outside it in a spirit of personal antagonism as has become orthodox nowadays.

Fig. 3.
Marble statue of youth found at Motya, western Sicily, ca. 470 BC. Ht. 1.81 m.

In the study of Greek pottery, the emphasis that was placed on the painters has been relaxed; attribution is felt to have had too high a profile. The moment of production that is the cornerstone of connoisseurship is seen as just one facet of these objects. The identity of the painters now ceases to be, as it once was, 'the key question'. Despite the fact that painted pottery receives little mention in written texts and that the objects were of low monetary value, a great deal of research continues to be devoted to painted pottery; the vases have the virtue of quantity, an advantage these days when the RAE machine needs feeding and the art market sounds the siren call to the prosperous.

Fig. 4. Women at home. Athenian red-figure pyxis, late 5th century BC. Ht. 0.0935 m.

Here too context receives much greater emphasis than before. More work is now being devoted to the findspots of pottery, whether sanctuary, symposium or cemetery, and to the reasons for the location, whether the objects were used near the place of production or conveyed to the farthest corners of the known world. In addition, the significance of the subject matter of the images that the different shapes of vases carry is being explored from a variety of angles. Scenes of everyday life – whether men going out hunting with the dog or women taking a welcome break to talk of love and to admire their jewellery (**Fig. 4**) – help to throw light on the social practices of the period. Iconography is giving way to iconology. Of course, the images on vase-paintings have to be understood as a construct, they do not reflect images of reality directly.

The vases that carry scenes from myth are not simply telling a story and need to be studied from different perspectives. A recently published scene on an Athenian red-figure bell-krater shows the wedding of the nymph Chariklo to that most righteous of Centaurs, Cheiron, teacher of heroes such as Jason and Achilles (**Fig. 5**). The identity of the painter is of less importance here than the way the

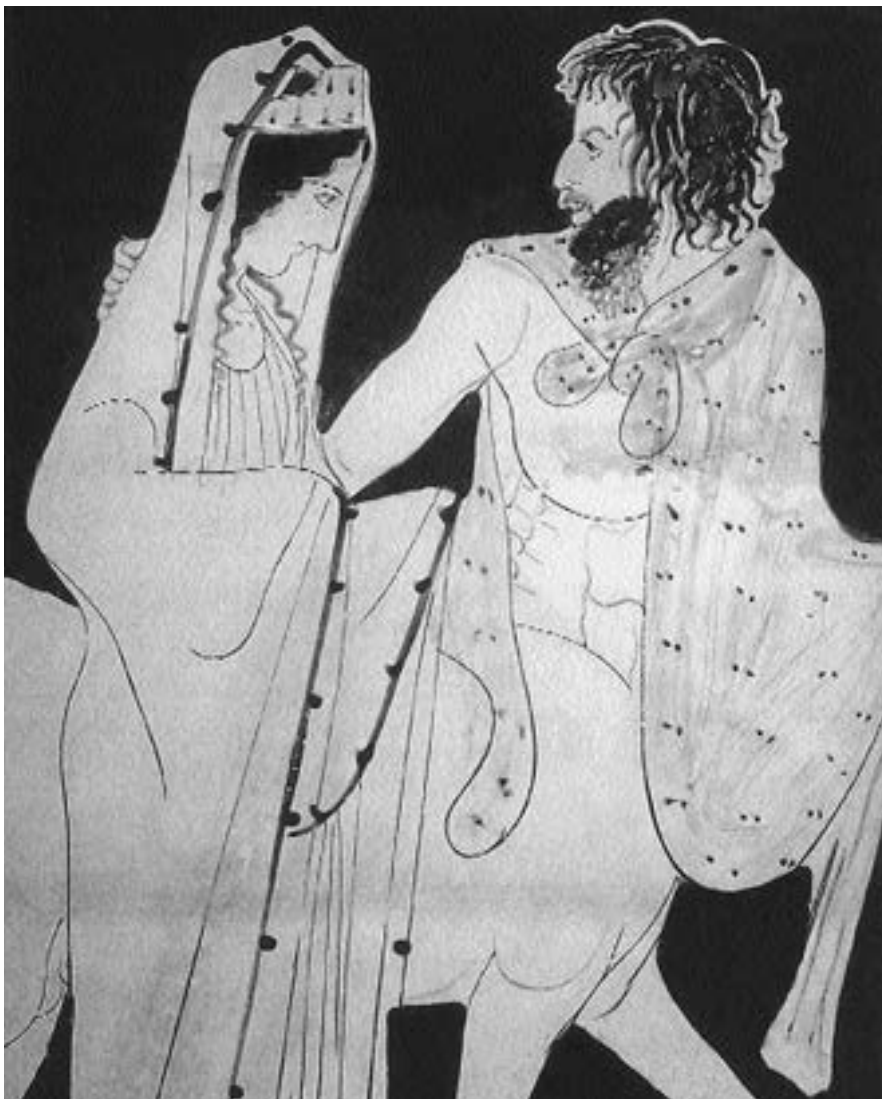

Fig. 5. Cheiron and Chariklo. Athenian red-figure bell krater (detail), ca. 440-430 BC, attributed to the Eupolis Painter. Total ht. of vase 0.365 m.

centaur has been represented. We need to consider what meaning this marriage of Beauty and the Beast, human bride and monstrous hybrid, had for the ancient viewer. The painter has fashioned a solicitous bridegroom leading along his modest bride with tenderness and restraint – an embodiment of culture in contrast to the wild temper of the others of his clan. In research into the nature of the

myths and their significance at different periods the visual evidence is seen as a vital component. Students of myth realise that the versions handed down in the texts are just one way of expressing the story and that the images that are painted on pots, adorn the walls and roofs of temples, decorate the walls of Roman houses or are fitted into mosaics, need to be taken into account as variations on the written version. Images were not simply made to illustrate texts; they played a much wider role than that.

Through being virtually indestructible, pottery has a lot to answer for. Positivism – drawing conclusions on the basis of what survive – is dangerous, and recent research has questioned the notion of the restraint that tends to be emphasised when speaking of classical art. Winckelmann with his 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur' is guilty of a half-truth. Both the Greeks and the Romans enjoyed ostentation as much as the next man or woman. If they had it, they flaunted it. Gold, silver, ivory, precious stones – votives for the gods, offerings to the dead, gifts for ambassadors, jewellery for the body, plate for the table and so on. A good example is the display of wealth and learning amongst the Roman élite in the ornament and decoration of their

Fig. 6. Priam before Achilles. Silver cup, Augustan period, found at Hoby, Denmark. Ht. 0.109 m.

houses: Greek-style statues, wall-paintings with Greek themes, mosaics and elaborate silverware with Homeric myths (**Fig. 6**). Social one-upmanship was the order of the day, and recent research has encouraged us to stop using the phrase 'minor arts' when referring to such items as cameos, jewellery, precious metalwork, and to consider the sumptuous products in the context of the lives of their owners who lived high on the hog.

Fig. 7. Homosexual couple. Silver cup ('Warren cup'), Augustan period. Ht. 0.15 m.

You know all too well that sex and gender continue to be ever-interesting topics, but the enthusiasm with which the doors of the Secret Cabinets have been flung open and the frankness with which their contents discussed are symptoms of the present age. What was created in the name of religion and what for sheer titillation? Context is once again to the fore – who would have seen the sexual antics depicted on Greek pottery? Which people would have entered the rooms in Pompeii and elsewhere that celebrated the pleasures available there? And who would have handled the silver cup that illustrated a homosexual couple (**Fig. 7**) and who the humbler Arretine cup with man and woman at play (**Fig. 8**)? But current research is now wider than this interest in erotica – more complex questions of social ranking, individual and collective behaviour, the

Fig. 8. Heterosexual couple. Arretine cup, Augustan period. Ht. 0.145 m.

instability of gender, sexual identity, sex and dress, sex and undress, etc. make this area a rich hunting ground for any researcher.

My final example of the extending of the boundaries in research concerns the way in which the visual material has revolutionised the study of Greek theatre. Rather than knowing only the difference between Jebb's and Pearson's texts, much recent work is being devoted to the ancient theatre as a social institution, and the performative elements in the dramas are being highlighted. To this end researchers are making thorough investigations of theatrical remains and antiquities that are abundant in the form of architecture, vase-paintings, wall paintings (**Fig. 9**), terracotta figurines, etc. The labours spent on building up the London archive of artefacts at the Institute of Classical Studies that spring from Tom Webster's pioneering work in the 1950s have revolutionised our understanding of the place the theatre had throughout all the classical centuries. People's addiction to theatregoing, whether in Greece and Italy or the outer confines of the Roman Empire, is clear from the spread of theatre building and the incidence of objects in different media that carry details of staging, costumes and masks, movement and gestures. All these make up the necessary background to understanding the tragic and comic texts. The more recently

Fig. 9. Euripides' Orestes. *Wall-painting in the 'Theatre Room' of Terrace House A, Ephesus, 2nd century AD.*

established Archive of Performance of Greek and Roman Drama in Oxford is beginning to bridge the gap between antiquity and now and preserve precious material witness to the staging of the ancient plays in the post-antique centuries right up to the present day. This is one of the foremost examples of co-operative research that is opening up the vastly increasing subject of Reception, studying the ways in which the classical inheritance has been reshaped throughout the classical centuries and understood by succeeding generations. Study of the afterlife of the visual aspects of classical antiquity is healthy, whether it is the theatre, painting, sculpture, architecture or film.

IV

After those few examples of the direction of recent research, let us now turn more briefly to my second viewpoint – education. Modern life has tended to sideline the ancient world in schools, assisted by the decrees of our educational overlords. Our subject is in constant crisis, numbers drop, examination boards withdraw their support without compunction or consultation, PGCE centres are fewer and fewer, other new subjects elbow ours out of the timetable. No one teaches Classics for a rest cure. Teachers and writers of schoolbooks have had to devise new ways of dealing with classical civilisation in schools, and here again one of those ways has been to increase and improve the emphasis on visual elements. There are few books that do not take advantage of the material dimension. Here are direct ways in which the Greeks and Romans can make an immediate impression on the pupils. There are countless background books for all ages that present modern re-drawings of myths, reconstructions of houses and cities, or coloured photographs of places and objects, from such gems as *A Loony Look at Roman Britain* to the recently published Thames and Hudson volume, *Panorama of the Ancient World.* Nor must we forget the importance of videos, CDs and internet sites, play stations, visits to museums and trips abroad – all help to feed those hungry for contact with their subject.

As with modern foreign languages, language course books for Greek and Latin also demand their share of illustrations from the very way in which the languages are now taught and examined; the visual element has become obligatory. With many pupils likely to drop Latin after two or four years, it cannot be a case of 'jam tomorrow' – the subject has to have some sweetness in it, even when tasted for a moment. Ever since 1970, with the publication of the pamphlets with their monochrome line drawings, the Cambridge Schools Classics Project's *Cambridge Latin Course* has been a shining example of how to set the language in context and engage attention to the stories and their setting. The latest edition is a treasure house, not of those grammatical peculiarities that one 19th-century headmaster offered as a privilege to his pupils when they read Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, but of information combining linguistic, historical and visual evidence. Gone are the days of the

illustrations which seem to have been heavily influenced by pictures in books by Enid Blyton.

The introduction of Latin language teaching in primary schools is one of the success stories within the last decade. The 'Minimus' experience is a fine example of how to introduce young pupils to Latin itself and at the same time to teach the vital information about English vocabulary, word derivation, grammar and spelling. But *Minimus* and *Minimus Secundus* are outstanding in another respect. Besides the entrancing drawings that accompany the lively narrative, emphasis is given to the archaeological finds from Vindolanda and York where the stories are set – and the bulk of the material included has been chosen from those specific sites and, more astonishingly, from a single historical period, building up, with the help of primary sources, a coherent and believable picture that can be tested against historical facts and the material record.

V

We now move to my third and final category – the general public. Classics, especially its visual side, is certainly not the possession solely of academics and school pupils. It flies free and, like a firecracker, shoots in unexpected, often misguided, directions. Over the past two generations, whether wittingly or unwittingly, people's lives have become more dependent on visual images than previously. There is no doubt that the general public has, or is thought to have, a great interest in the classical world, no matter how perverted that interest might be. Because it is through the mass media that this interest is mainly fuelled, it is the visual that is paramount. Once there was the word on radio, now there is the image on television. There are various levels of interest and ages to be catered for; the choice of approach is open. The past is marketed and manipulated for general consumption, and there are various channels by which this nourishment is made available.

The enhanced possibilities of travel to warmer countries have taken Mr and Mrs Everyman (including you and me) not only to enjoy the sun, sand, exotic food and drink but also to be able to visit the sites that house the remnants of the classical world, whether good old Delphi (**Fig. 10**) or rarer sites such as Baalbek (if still open to Westerners). Obviously, the general public does not think in terms of

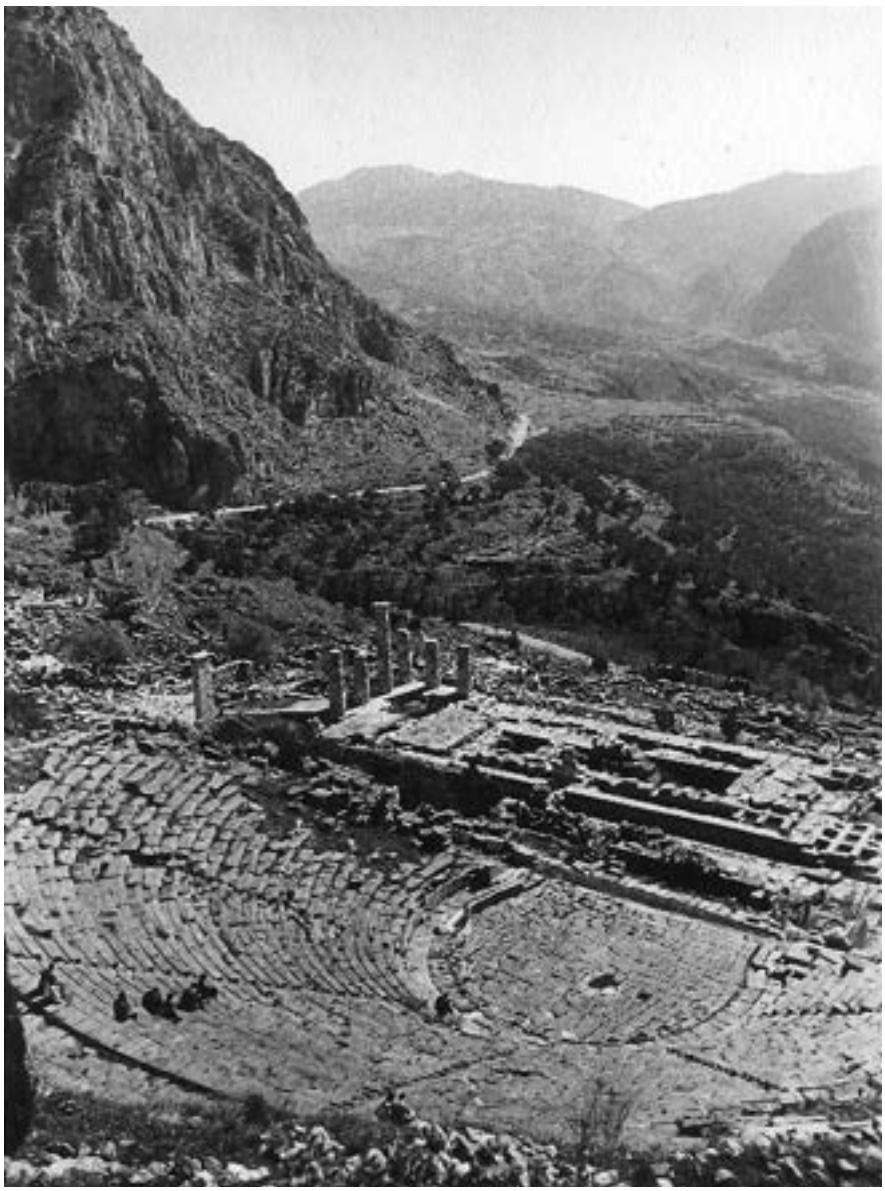

Fig. 10. Delphi.

classical texts, but may gain some information from the increasingly sophisticated illustrated guide-books that cater for their needs and weigh down their luggage. They derive less help from recent fictional stories that fill the gaps, or imaginatively bend the evidence, in the historical record. (I must say I hadn't realised that Nero failed to

Fig. 11. Berlin Museum, ca. 1900.

Fig. 12. Getty Museum, ca. 2000.

commit suicide and went in search of a musical career, as Tim Holt proposes.) Our putative travellers may also take a tour or a cruise with a guide to help them understand what they are viewing on the way. Some years ago when lecturing on a Swan Hellenic Cruise, I told my audience on board that an excursion to Delphi in a group such as ours was a good way to see the site as no Greek would have visited there alone. When we reached Delphi, I found that it was a Greek school day-out and the site was overrun with blue-pinafored youngsters, and I overheard one of my number feelingly remark 'It's all right that chap saying we should come in a group but this is bloody ridiculous!' It is certainly rare in this age of archaeological tourism to find any site unencumbered.

Another point of public contact, whether at home or abroad, is via museums. By their display of their own collections and maybe with items borrowed from others, museums can both satisfy and shape interest in the past, and it is inevitably the visual element that is to the fore. They are no longer repositories of treasures arranged by medium (**Fig. 11**); by the way they are arranged, the artefacts are given educational force with informative texts (**Fig. 12**). Special exhibitions enable museum items to be given a context and become the stuff of bygone life.

Sitting together and watching the classical past brought to life is another way that the general public is given access to it. 'Son et Lumière' has now perhaps become old hat. But a more recent spectacle was of course the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympic Games in 2004 (**Fig. 13**). The presentation was imaginative and clever and, in my opinion, avoided the accusation of kitsch that was all too likely to overwhelm it. I am sure there were some spectators, whether watching in the stadium or viewing at home, who were stirred into finding more about ancient Greece and its people.

The theatre is closer to what we classicists would regard as a true shared experience of the ancient world, and there continues to be no shortage of opportunities to see the great tragedies and comedies on stage. Directors in the professional theatre are more willing to experiment with staging, costumes, masks and movement than previously; one thinks of Peter Hall's *Oresteia* of 1981 and *Iphigenia at Aulis* of 2004, both at the National Theatre. We seem to need the catharsis of tragedy as much now as ever before, whether in

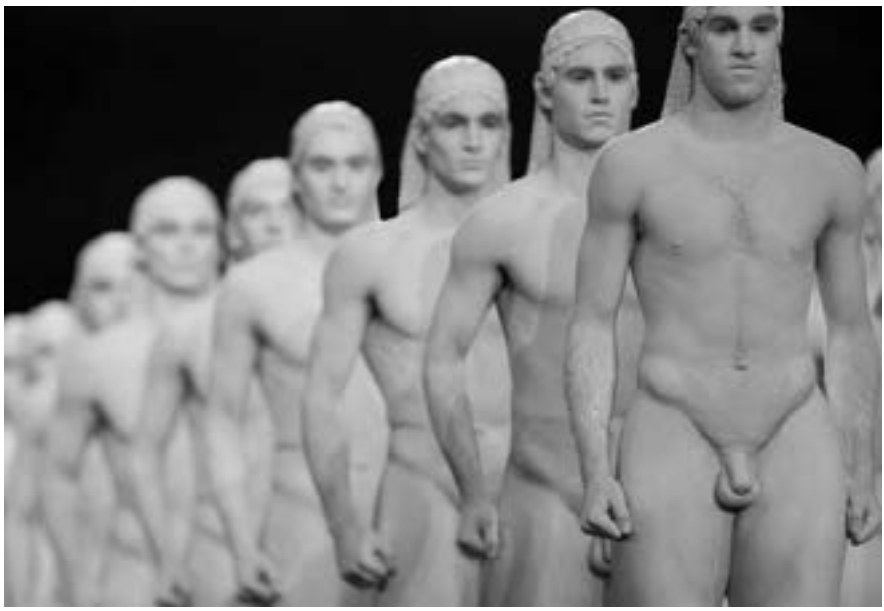

Fig. 13. Tableau from the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympics, 2004.

translation or in adaptations. Greek drama works so well in any language that ironically it militates against the need to learn classical Greek. Amateur productions in the original language have also moved on from such pioneering attempts as the Cambridge *Eumenides* of 1885 with its truly terrifying Furies (**Fig. 14**). I hope we have no pregnant women in today's audience.

Undoubtedly the modern medium that has the most influence on the general public is the cinema. (Some talk of Alexander; I shall not.) The cinema has had a love affair with the classical world from the silent movies onwards, and recently that love has been re-ignited in an extravagant fashion and become a serious subject for research. Although some modern films are said to make covert reference to contemporary events, for the general public it doesn't matter if history or myth is rewritten and reshaped – spectacle and special effects reign supreme, along with Achilles' pecs and Cleopatra's cleavage. Agamemnon may die at Troy, the gods may have no part to play, and no one in the audience will object (except those who know their classical myths). Maximus the Gladiator not only makes mincemeat of the opposition, both inside and outside the arena, but also of Roman imperial history. Never mind the authenticity, feel the

Fig. 14. Aeschylus' Eumenides*, Cambridge University Production 1885.*

spectacle. For the young brought up on a diet of animated films, what better than to have Heracles riding on Pegasus, though in antiquity the hero never came near the animal? Academic consultants, if any have been engaged, may protest, but the producer or director has the final word. In the early 1930s Bernard Ashmole, then at University College London, was hired as technical adviser for the never completed Korda film of Robert Graves' *I, Claudius*. He had trouble explaining that there were only six Vestal Virgins at any one time in Rome; the director eventually settled on forty. When he reached home, Ashmole described to his wife the scene with the vestal Virgins (**Fig. 15**) that he had witnessed that day as 'a very large first Communion in St. Peter's, staged in the manner of the Folies Bergères'.[9]

What film-makers are providing is a night out, a fictitious story, not a course on Roman history or Greek mythology. Their reshaping of classical stories certainly does seem less damaging than rewriting modern history. But what sticks in the craw is the emotional simplicity and stereotypical corniness to which Hollywood tends to

[9]Donna Kurtz (ed.), *Bernard Ashmole 1894-1988, An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1994), p. 67.

reduce each story in its bid for the ratings. The Europeans can be more ingenious and innovative; one thinks of such art-house pieces as Cocteau's 'Orphée', Fellini's 'Satyricon', Harrison's 'Prometheus' and Pasolini's take on 'Oedipus Rex'. But it is doubtful to what extent these appropriations of antiquity have engrossed the attention of the average man or woman, untutored in the subtleties of classical mythology.

TV viewing in the privacy of one's own home seems to produce a more serious strand amongst the public – classical history is sometimes presented in a less populist manner. The personalities of this televisual world such as the Starkeys and the Schamas have their classical counterparts – Lloyd Llewellyn Jones prostrate in Persia, Bettany Hughes striding like Artemis over the mountains, Adam Hart Davis, that earnest and experimental fugitive from 'Blue Peter', and Michael Wood with his tight jeans (dishy or dishevelled, depending on your point of view) with his programmes that mix self-promotion with an informative and beguiling presentation. As an alternative, we can take over command of computerised ancient battles and snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Although narrative

Fig. 15. Scene with Vestal virgins from the 1931 (unfinished) Korda film of Robert Graves' I, Claudius.

Fig. 16. Maidenform advertisement in Vogue.

and events still play a large part in most of these programmes, the nature of the medium gives room for exposition and analysis with which producers could more easily experiment than can be done with film. Call these programmes what you will – infotainment, docudrama – the more academics who are recruited to advise and whose advice is heeded, the more likely is it that in the end the programmes will become more authentic, without, one hopes, losing their popular appeal. But it is vital that we maintain the interest of the general public in our subject.

Finally, let us not forget that the common perception of the classical world is also influenced by the way in which goods are advertised. Just to take the simple level of classical names and images used in sales promotion, whether it is beauty, desire or underwear. Classical images are felt to strike the right sort of chord in persuading

everyman and everywoman to part with their money. Anything can be sold if you add a classical name, even more so with an image attached to it – it gives snob appeal and status. A classical figure has been cleverly used to advertise the talcum powder called 'Kouros' by copying the Olympia Apollo – really an act of lèse-majesté but smart nonetheless. A final return to the 1950s gives us a vintage advert from *Vogue* announcing 'I dreamed I was Venus de Milo in my Maidenform bra' (**Fig. 16**). This exhibited a bad attack of the classicals – as a support for her hand the model has Hermes of Olympia reduced in size, given a fig leaf and printed in reverse. The Centaur has been selling cognac for many years, Nike promotes sports equipment, winged Pegasus sells the horsepower in petrol. Even 'something for the weekend, sir' is sold as Trojan or Spartan, but I really can't finish a Presidential Address with an advertisement for one of those.

VI

I have tried to show how the visual impact of classical culture has grown over the last 50 years. For some I realise this must be anathema; they will recall Ernst Curtius' other dictum: 'To understand Pindar's poems requires severe mental effort – to understand the Parthenon frieze does not.'[10] I agree with the first (Gilbert Murray's 'not laborious' still rings in my ears), but not with the second. If we wish to promote the cause of Classics, we close our eyes to the visual world at our peril.

[10]Ernst Robert Curtius, *ibid.* (n. 7).

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