

It won't quite take you 10 years to get around, but *Troy: Myth and Reality* is certainly epic by exhibition standards. If I'd encountered a beautiful, mysterious woman weaving on an island halfway around I would absolutely have accepted her offer of a hot meal, a glass of wine and a nice lie-down.

In its new exhibition, the British Museum explores the multifarious story of the ancient city and its legends, using objects, artefacts and art. "Troy" is divided into three broad sections: the first addresses the stories of the Trojan wars as interpreted in antiquity; the second, Troy itself as an archaeological site; the third, the huge cultural impact of the myths, from the Renaissance to the present day. There is, as Melvyn Bragg would say, a lot to unpack here.

A small opening display lays out the territory. We are in the realm of myth: ownership of the narrative is universal, and any idea of the "real" or "right" interpretation is up for discussion. Monumental Modernist works by Anthony Caro and Cy Twombly are shown alongside an Athenian amphora painted by Exekias in about 530BC: each in their own way a response to a set of stories that had come down to them over the centuries.

Those stories remain gripping, compelling, complex and troubling. Exekias's painting shows Achilles falling in love with Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons, as she dies impaled on his spear. It's an apt opening gesture for a show that's never short on drama.

To underscore the slippery nature of our fictional territory, early on we encounter Homer, through whose epic poems *Odyssey* and *Iliad* the myths of the Trojan wars have been passed down over millennia. In various pieces of Greek and Roman statuary he appears as a nice white-bearded fellow, though no one knows what he looked like, whether he was the sole author of the poems, whether the stories he set down were already long-established and he merely the greatest teller of them, or indeed whether he himself was a fiction.

From the judgement of Paris through to Odysseus's return to Penelope, the stories themselves are told through ancient objects, ranging in scale from an engraved gemstone to a vast stone sarcophagus. It probably could have told the whole thing using its collection of painted bowls alone; instead it has borrowed widely, with treasures including wall paintings from Pompeii, silver Roman cups found buried in Denmark and an exquisite Roman table support carved in the form of the sea monster Scylla from the Archaeological Museum in Naples.

Rather than resorting to distracting explanatory screens, the narrative flow of this section of the exhibition is animated by projected text and line drawings that appear on the surfaces surrounding exhibits. Thus we can examine the Sophilos Dinos, a tall wine-mixing bowl. Across bowl, stand and base it carries scenes relating to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, at which goddess Eris - angered not to have been invited - throws a golden apple inscribed "to the most beautiful" into the party. Cue furious competition to be its rightful recipient. Enter Paris, son of King Priam of Troy, to judge the goddesses gathered:

## An odyssey through the myths of Troy

The ancient city and its legends are explored in an epic show at the British Museum, a story grippingly told through classical treasures and the imaginations of later artists. By **Hettie Judah**



Aphrodite bribes him with the hand of Helen, the world's most beautiful woman. Paris picks Aphrodite, and heads off to claim his prize. The only hitch: Helen was already married to Menelaus, King of Sparta.

For those not well versed in the conventions by which a contemporary audience would have identified all these characters, the use of explanatory animation with images from the Dinos allows the story to emerge from the pictures.

**We can turn to the Troy stories to find whatever it is we search for**

Over the course of the exhibition, it becomes fascinating to watch how conventions in portraying characters and events emerge and how they endure: Achilles swathed in a cloak to indicate his grief for the death of his beloved Patroclus; Aeneas carrying his elderly father on his back as Troy burns, and of course the great wooden horse, wheeled into the walled city as a gift, its belly stuffed with Greek warriors.

While there is no clear evidence that this great war between the Greeks and Trojans took place, the city of Troy itself is now broadly agreed to have occupied a site in northern Turkey, near the Dardanelles, in an area now known as the Troad. To the north it protected access to the Marmara and Black

seas. It was (and continues to be) a site of strategic importance. Xerxes crossed the Dardanelles strait, from Asia to Europe, on a pontoon made of lashed-together boats; during the First World War, the Battle of Gallipoli took place nearby.

There have been successive waves of archaeological exploration on the Troad, in which myths have melded intoxicatingly with reality. Heinrich Schliemann, who started excavations in 1870, immediately dubbed the first structure he unearthed "Priam's Palace". A hoard of metal objects was presented to the world as "Priam's Treasure" and the "Jewels of Helen".

Schliemann was not only excitable in his attributions; he was shady in his dealings, light-

Clockwise from left: 'The Wounded Achilles' by Filippo Albacini; terracotta face pot from Troy; Achilles kills Penthesilea, Athenian amphora; 'Judgement of Paris' (after Rubens) by Eleanor Antin CHATSWORTH HOUSE; BERLIN STATE MUSEUMS, BRITISH MUSEUM; RONALD FELDMAN GALLERY

fingered with his finds and a teller of tall tales, adding another layer of drama to the Troy stories.

In the third section of the show, the Trojan Wars, as retold by the Roman poet Virgil in *Aeneid*, have transformed into a foundation myth for Europe. Aeneas, having fled the burning city of Troy, was seen as the founding father of Rome: the virtuous refugee who became king. Medieval and Renaissance Europe looked back to Troy as part of its origin story, many countries (Britain included) looping in a Trojan hero or their descendant to populate their founding fathers. Paintings by artists from Angelica

Kauffman to William Blake, Evelyn De Morgan to Lucas Cranach the Elder show the endurance and evolution of tropes established in antiquity, and the reinterpretation of elements of the story to fit the mores and styles of the artists' own time.

Bringing things up to date, a wonderful photographic work by the US artist Eleanor Antin offers a modern take on the judgement of Paris with Hera dressed as a 1950s housewife wielding a vacuum cleaner, Aphrodite in a clingy evening gown, and Athena totting a rifle in combat gear and knee boots. A compelling case for the relevance of these stories in the present day is made with footage of *The Queens of Syria*, a play from 2011 combining Euripides's *The Trojan Women* with a testament from the Syrian refugee performers.

The exhibition then over-eggs the question of contemporary relevance with the commentary offered in the final section. The art is already making that case: it does not need another layer placed on top of it.

Having said that, all this is a useful reminder of the larger - bloodthirsty and morally tangled - backdrop to the references Boris Johnson and his classically educated ilk sprinkle so liberally into their rhetoric.

For there is a deeper story underlying this exhibition: as with so many creation myths, we can turn to the Troy stories to find whatever it is we search for. The death of Hector becomes the framing device to paint a beautiful naked man; Thetis dipping Achilles in the Styx becomes a means to honour a woman's loss of her son; the Siege of Troy itself, a mythic reference for the horrors of warfare - which resonates in every age.

'Troy: Myth and Reality', The British Museum, London, to 8 March 2020 (020 7323 8000)

## Last night's television

ADAM SWEETING



### Restorative justice for a rape victim as family secrets tumble out

» **The Family Secret** Channel 4, 9pm ★★★★★  
 » **Takaya: Lone Wolf** BBC4, 9pm ★★★★★

**R**estorative justice practitioner" sounds like a euphemism for a *Mad Max*-style lone avenger, but in the devastating **The Family Secret**, it was a woman called Kate whose job was to bring together conflicting parties and help find a resolution. Cameras and microphones eavesdropped with pitiless intimacy as Kate brokered a meeting between 30-something Kath and the man who had raped and abused her when she was seven. The worst of it was that he was her older brother, Robert.

Kath had guarded her secret from the rest of her family ever since, as it mercilessly eroded her sense of self, her confidence and the way she viewed the world. "I can't go on living this lie any more," she said. "I need to face him and look him in the eye."

Which she did, although we only saw Robert in partial views - his back, his eye, his woolly hat, but never enough to fully reveal what he looked like. This had the result of making him seem like a cringing, evasive nonentity. As he admitted his guilt and claimed that he was learning to become a better person, he sounded as though he was regurgitating memorised chunks from a self-therapy leaflet. You'd have thrown him down the stairs sooner than believe him.

Kath remained quietly determined, never swearing

**Kath remained quietly determined, spelling out what her brother had done to her**

or raising her voice, but systematically spelling out what Robert had done to her and how it would not be forgiven. Kath, you felt, was strong enough to get through it, but the collateral damage was cataclysmic. By a bitter irony, her mother, Andrea, was a child protection social worker, and the revelation that she had utterly failed her own daughter left her in pieces. Andrea's husband, Chris (also only partially seen), couldn't bring himself to condemn his son, and seemed unable to summon the willpower to prevent the family disintegrating.

As we reached the end credits, the family home was up for sale and Andrea and Chris had separated. Kath's other brother, Graeme, seemed to have aged 30 years during



'The Family Secret' featured Kath, who was abused by an older brother

the course of the film, and looked like a ghost of his previous self. It was fascinating, but agonising.

Who can explain the mystery of **Takaya: Lone Wolf**, which has taken up residence on an archipelago off Vancouver Island, and has developed his own unique hunting methods while patrolling his turf. His behaviour runs totally contrary to the close family bond typical of wolves, but if anybody can shed some light, it's wildlife photographer and environmentalist Cheryl Alexander, who's been carefully studying Takaya (it means "wolf" in the language of the indigenous Songhees people) for the seven years he has been living there.

Set against a hauntingly beautiful backdrop of mountains and ocean, the story felt like an elemental parable of man and nature. Alexander obviously feels a powerful emotional connection to Takaya, but manages to avoid anthropomorphising him too much. Yet perhaps Takaya is an outcast from his pack, or a romantic hero grieving for a lost partner.

Whatever his motivations, Takaya is doing wonders for the public image of wolves. He's intelligent, resourceful, has movie-star looks and has never shown any inclination to take a bite out of a human (though he's developed an extraordinary ability to peel the skin off a seal). And the good news was that a young female wolf has been spotted not too far away, perhaps lured by Takaya's beseeching wails. We breathlessly await further developments.

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