

Changing Shapes



Latona and the Frogs, Magdalena van de Passe, 1633, engraving. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.



Apollo and Daphne, Hieronymus Cock, 1558, etching, 230 x 312mm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

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Apollon et Daphné

Apollo and Daphne, Théodore Chassériau, 1844, lithograph, 320 x 245mm.

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to this week's Tuesday Talk, part of a series of podcasts given by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, the art gallery and concert hall on the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston campus. My name is Helen Cobby, I'm the Assistant Curator, and today we are looking at the Barber's new print bay display called *Changing Shapes: Metamorphosis in Art*, which I researched and curated over lockdown and the summer. I'm pleased to say it has now just opened at the Barber and will run until 31 January. During this short talk, I'll introduce the main themes of this display and a couple of the featured works of art. To begin however, I'll start by explaining what the Barber's print bay displays are more generally, to provide some context.

We normally have six different displays of works on paper each year, divided between two bays, which are intimate, purpose-designed spaces for displaying prints and drawings, just off the Green and Beige galleries. Usually they feature a selection of the Barber's excellent collection of over 800 works on paper. Some of the highlights in the collection include old master drawings by Dürer, Ingres, Rembrandt and Turner, a group of German Expressionist prints, and works by 19th-century artists from France. The collection is constantly evolving with new acquisitions, recently with a print by Käthe Kollwitz and drawings by contemporary artist Tess Jaray. Prints and drawings are fragile works of art, and susceptible to fading with prolonged light exposure, so they cannot be on permanent display. Instead, they are stored in our Prints and Drawings Study Room, which can be accessed by appointment, and are brought out for public viewing on rotation for various displays or when requested for loan by other galleries.

One of the prints now on view in our new display is *Latona and the Frogs* by a 17th-century female artist Magdalena van de Passe from Utrecht. She was from a family of engravers, and, with her father, planned to produce an illustrated book of Ovid's epic Roman poem *Metamorphoses*. Her illustrations were published - but posthumously - in 1677. In her print at the Barber, the superbly detailed landscape dwarfs the goddess Latona and her babies, Apollo and Diana, who have been drinking from the lake. Different types of leaves and foliage are carefully delineated, providing an array of tones. The greenery is punctuated in places by exposed tree trunks and impressions of highly textured bark. This helps to accentuate certain trees and increase the illusion of depth within the composition. The gnarled bare branches and exposed roots in the foreground complete the framing of the scene, and add an almost anthropomorphic quality to the trees - their woody limbs are outstretched towards the male figures writhing in the lake. If they had the chance, would they help or hinder the goddess Latona?

According to mythology, Latona and her children had been drinking from the lake when they were scorned by peasants, who paddled in the water to make it muddy and undrinkable. In revenge, Latona transformed them into frogs. The artist Magdalena van de Passe presents the peasant men in mid transformation, with their hands and faces the first to change. This emphasis on body parts deemed particularly expressive and human encourages feelings of disgust and horror in us - the viewer, urging us to take sides with the angry and protective mother.

This is a scene inspired by Ovid's most famous poem *Metamorphoses*, which is the starting point for our new print bay display. The display introduces Ovid's poem and looks at some of the ways in which artists have responded to and illustrated moments from it over four centuries. The selection of works on view range from mid-16th century Flemish etchings to an early 20th-century drawing by French painter André Derain and a 1950s Surrealist print by German artist Max Ernst.

The interpretation focuses on ambiguities, and juxtapositions of the erotic and the playful against the harsh realities of human experience and capabilities, including corruption, sexual crimes and female pain.

Publius Ovidius Naso, known as Ovid, started writing *Metamorphoses* in Latin around the end of the first century AD - and, within it, states, 'I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms'. The term 'metamorphosis' is elusive and multi-layered; biologically it relates to a complete change of form through successive transformative stages in a lifespan of an organism. It has magical connotations too - describing a change of physical form or substance especially by supernatural means - and relates to inner psychological transformations of being and identity. It is also about perpetual change, ironically the only certainty in life.

Ovid's poem incorporates these aspects in over 250 stories woven together by themes of psychological and physical transformation, through which timeless topics such as romantic and motherly love, pursuit and punishment, and ambition and downfall are considered. It is set in a fantastical landscape but also explores his own sense of Roman origins and the mythic founding of Rome, from the creation of the world to the deification of Julius Caesar in 42 BC. In doing so, Ovid captures a world of uncertainty and destabilisation. Perhaps this, and the relatively carefree attitude towards sex and adultery in his poetry, was the reason for Ovid's eventual banishment by Emperor Augustus in 8 AD from Rome to Tomis by the Black Sea, in what is now Romania. *Metamorphoses* was finished while he was in exile.

Even during his lifetime, some critics found Ovid's poetry disturbing because of the way he applied his wit to grave and terrible situations. The poem has also faced recent scrutiny. In 2015, Columbia University undergraduates petitioned for their professors to affix trigger warnings to the work in response to its vivid depictions of rape and sexual assault.

The poem's dependence on the display of violence and the way that this and the work's canonical status is not always challenged or investigated, prompted the Classicist Amy Richlin to include her essay *Reading Ovid's Rapes* in her wider feminist publication entitled *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*, published in 2014. She argues that Ovid's coupling of violence and sexuality could be explained - but not excused - by the savage aggression to which Romans were exposed in the arena and by the opportunities for sexual abuse available to Roman men in a slave culture. She also considers the construction of gender through body modification and class hierarchies. Others argue that, on the contrary, Ovid's descriptions need not be read as normalising rape but are, rather, part of the poem's complex but deeply radical dissection and critique of Augustan Rome's association of violence with sexuality.

The Barber's new print bay display includes two prints, made almost 300 years apart, depicting one of Ovid's most well-known scenes of pursuit and rape - from the story of the sun god Apollo's pursuit of the nymph Daphne. The terrified Daphne asks her father, the river god Peneus, for help and consequently is transformed into a laurel tree (*laurea* is Latin for Greek *daphne*). In the earlier work, an etching made by the Netherlandish artist Hieronymus Cock in 1558, the artist has stressed the closeness of the pursuer to the pursued, which is in keeping with Ovid's descriptions. Netherlandish artists and erudite wealthy collectors were well educated in mythological narratives, familiar with the works of Homer, Virgil, Ovid as well as contemporary mythological treatises.

At the time, artists usually represented mythological figures in a style rooted in the classical past, often epitomised by Italianate landscapes and idealised portrayals of the human figure. Hieronymus Cock ran a successful print shop and publishing house in Antwerp with his wife Volxcken Dierix. The prints they published testify to how their publishing house functioned as both a catalyst and a product of the vogue for Italy in the Netherlands in the mid-16th century.

In the Barber's print of Apollo and Daphne, Hieronymus Cock utilises his great skill as a landscape artist informed by the Italianate manner. He captures, with decisive cross-hatching, vast rolling hills interspersed with craggy rocks and clusters of foliage, towns and villages. Some areas of the paper are left unmarked and so un-inked, and are themselves integral parts of the composition. This technique helps to indicate the fall of light and the way it bathes the entire composition, a trait of Italianate landscapes. The landscape first demands our attention, rather than the two muscular figures caught in flight in the centre foreground.

Here, the action of Apollo chasing Daphne, and the desperation of the moment, are intensified by showing Daphne in the process of metamorphosing while still in flight. However, this is not a sympathetic portrayal of Daphne. Instead, the artist again follows Ovid in the way he reveals how her top half has been stripped bare during the chaos and haste of her flight. Her clothes seem to be falling away from her as her head and arms begin to metamorphose into a tree - but note how her breasts are still shown to be very much human, and are exposed for Apollo and, by extension, for the viewer.

The other version of this scene is a lithograph by the 19th-century French artist Théodore Chassériau. The unusual iconography of Apollo kneeling here suggests his submission to Daphne as he pleads with her to reciprocate his love. Is this Chassériau's attempt to validate Apollo's intentions? The pose intensifies the emotional force of the episode and draws attention to Daphne's changing form. Apollo is clearly touching her; Ovid describes how the sun god feels her skin and kisses her, even as she metamorphoses. In Mongan's translation, Apollo even exclaims, "Since you can't be my bride, at least / you will certainly be my tree!" Chassériau eroticises these incriminating advances and portrays Daphne as an idealised and passive nude, common in Romantic art of the time. Her serene expression further complicates questions around consent, passion and sexual violence.

Despite the controversies it provokes, *Metamorphoses* is among the most referenced and influential poems in European literary history.

Shakespeare and Chaucer, for example, read and adapted some of the tales into their own work. The poem remains one of the most potent sources of mythological narrative and one that still encourages us to think about how we exist in the world. In particular, the interconnectivity of the human and natural world is pertinent to our own times.

The universal themes addressed in Ovid's poem have also inspired European visual artists for centuries, including the Renaissance master Titian; *Metamorphoses* is more widely illustrated than any other literary source, written or orally transmitted, except the Bible. The theme or feeling of ambiguity is prevalent in many of these myths, which is partly why it has attracted so many artists since its creation and continues to inspire today. I don't have space to explore this theme of ambiguity here, but do visit the new print bay display if you can, as this is addressed in the interpretation within the display itself. These feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty strongly resonate with our own current situations and experiences created by the Covid-19 pandemic. I wonder what we are being transformed into and what Ovid would make of it all?

Thank you very much for listening, and thank you to Jack Davies for composing and playing the guitar music that introduces and ends these weekly talks. There will be another talk next week by one of my colleagues, so please do come back then if you would like to hear more.

Further Reading

Barolsky, Paul. *Ovid and the Metamorphoses of Modern Art from Botticelli to Picasso*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014.

Bernstock, Judith. 'Classical Mythology in Twentieth-Century Art: An Overview of a Humanistic Approach' in *Artibus et Historiae*, 1993, Vol. 14, No. 27, pp. 153-183.

Hughes, Ted. *Tales from Ovid*. London: Faber & Faber, 2002.

Richlin, Amy. 'Reading Ovid's Rapes' in *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2014.

Shamos, Geoffrey. 'Bodies of Knowledge: The Presentation of Personified Figures in Engraved Allegorical Series Produced in the Netherlands, 1548-1600' in *Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 2015.

Speaker info

Helen Cobby joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Assistant Curator in the summer of 2017. She works on a variety of projects including the care, interpretation and display of the Prints and Drawings collection, the digitisation of the collections, and research into new acquisitions. She has also curated an exhibition about the Scottish Colourists with the Director Nicola Kalinsky, and assisted with the curation of the most recent exhibition, 'Cornwall as Crucible: Modernity and Internationalism in Mid-Century Britain', as well as contributing essays to the accompanying exhibition booklets. Her research interests also include Rodin's sculpture and photography (the subject of her MA dissertation at the University of London), JMW Turner's early prints and drawings, feminist art history and criticism, and 20th-century American women printmakers. For the latter, she was recently awarded a Jonathan

Ruffer Curatorial Grant from the Art Fund to undertake research in New York City. Prior to the Barber, Helen worked in a variety of museums, including Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum - as the research curator, Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum, and most recently the Ashmolean Museum, where she curated a touring exhibition of Turner's early architectural work.

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.