

# Out of Hours Exhibition

## GODS AND HEROES

### Defining Beauty:

#### The Body in Ancient Greek Art

*The British Museum, London,  
26 March 2015–5 July 2015*

Another title for this review could have been 'The body in the Attic'. The exhibition sets out to do just what it says on the tin which, in the words of Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, is to demonstrate the ancient Greeks' attempts to 'make sense of the world in human terms'. This remarkable show is sumptuously staged, dramatically lit and, at least on the day that I went, seems to generate quiet contemplation, if not awe, among the visitors. There are over 100 objects here, almost all beautiful. Most are sculptures, of the mystical, divine, athletic and handsome — Aphrodite, Hermaphrodite, Iris, and Eros — but there are also gorgeous vases and bowls and other artefacts from the ancient Greek period.

It is difficult to pick out the star pieces because there are so many of them. Aphrodite and the Discobolus in the first room are fantastic, and the full-size bronze of a young man recently hauled out of the sea off the Croatian coast is little short of a miracle. This is the Apoxyomenos; a Greek athlete cleaning the sand and sweat off his naked body after some sporting event. The rendering of the head and face is

unbelievable: you can almost hear him breathing. The great frieze from the Parthenon — the Elgin Marbles — casts its timeless spell.

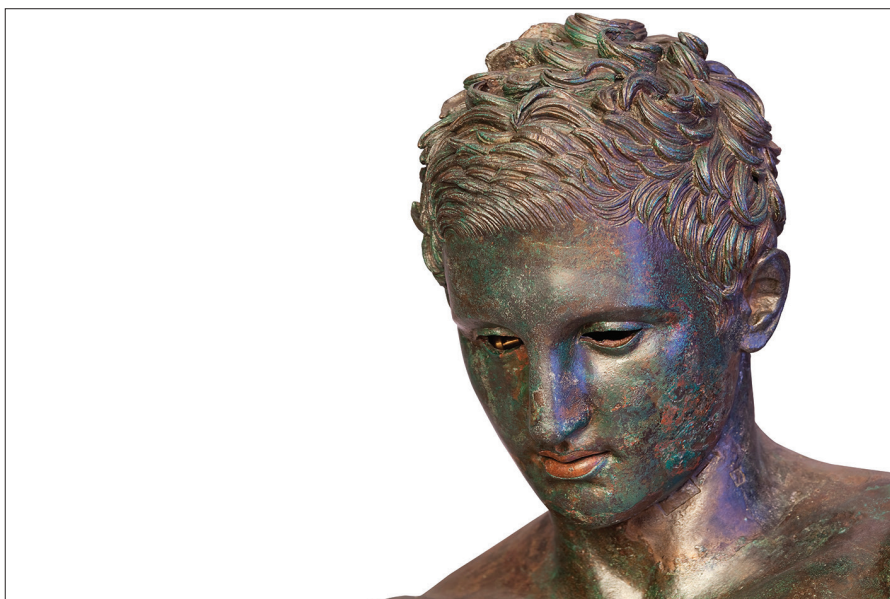
The marbles caused a sensation when they were brought to London over 200 years ago, and remain spectacular. The archer in the next room, fully painted, is a reminder that many of these pieces which we only know as pale and coolly marmoreal were, at the time they were produced, brightly painted. Some of the fragments, the most damaged

pieces, are the most magical. The Grecian vases, of course, tell their own wonderful



**Pottery: black-figure amphora: the death of Priam. Greek, 550BC-540BC (circa). Vulci, Lazio, Italy. ©The Trustees of the British Museum.**

**Detail of head of Apoxyomenos. Bronze, Hellenistic or Roman replica after a bronze original from the second quarter or the end of the 4th century BC. ©Tourism Board of Mali Losinj.**



stories: one shows an older man, possibly Socrates himself, watching two young men, one already aroused, about to become more intimate.

The show ends with a room of such power and splendour that, in someone else's words, it makes you go weak at the knees. Here is the bust of Alexander the Great, the Gandhara Buddha, the strangely uncomfortable, yet hypnotic, Dionysus, and the amazing Belvedere Torso.

I was more taken with the objects themselves than with the curatorial concept, but whichever way you look at it this exhibition is, as well as being a concentrated tutorial in Greek art and world history, an unforgettable chance to see some of the most astonishing works of man and, perhaps, an ironic counterpoint to contemporary world events.

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