

British Art Talks podcast

Season 1, Episode 1:

Cora Gilroy-Ware and Mary Beard, *William Etty and the Classical Body*

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Anna Reid: Welcome to the first episode of *British Art Talks*, a new podcast from The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. I'm Anna Reid, Head of Research at The PMC. To start our summer series, we're focusing on an 1837 painting by William Etty called *The Sirens and Ulysses*. Working in the early 19th century, Etty produced mythological and literary scenes displaying the female body. At the time, the artist insisted that "to the pure of heart, all things are pure," but his unconventional portrayals of the classical nude, both shocked and captivated audiences. I'm joined now by classicist Mary Beard and art historian Cora Gilroy-Ware, author of *The Classical Body in Romantic Britain*. Welcome to you both. Mary, could you remind us of the story told in this painting?

Mary Beard: [chuckles] Yes, it's a very simple classical story. It originates in Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus is on his way home, trying to get back from the Trojan War to his wife, Penelope in Ithaca, and he has all kinds of distractions, let's say, on the way. One of those distractions is the mythical women, half-fish, half-women known as the Sirens. The Sirens have the most beautiful singing voices. They sit on the shore, and they lure hapless sailors to their death. They're captivated by their song, they go over to explore the Sirens, but they end up crashing and dying on the coast.

Now, Odysseus is extremely keen to hear the voice of the Sirens but doesn't want to end up dead. He instructs his men, and this is what we see happening in Etty's painting. He instructs his men to tie him fast to the mast of the ship, to plug their own ears up with beeswax to let him hear the song of the Sirens, but not let him follow them. [chuckles] That is actually what they do.

Now, you can tell from the way I've told it, that it is a curious, intriguing, mythological story. It's also homing in on some of the basic Greek topics of misogyny. It's about what women do to a man, about women's danger. The idea that the pleasures of the woman can be the death of the man, and that's what we see here, though Odysseus himself escapes.

Anna Reid: Cora, can you describe Etty's painting for the listeners?

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Well, this is a very large painting. Up to this point, it was the largest work that Etty had ever produced. It's roughly 14 by 9 feet, so it's on a very grand scale. The composition consists of three groups of figures. First, we have the main group in the foreground, which is made up of those three very robust, creamy female bodies that are slightly larger than life-size. They're all completely naked, covered only by loose draperies that are placed over their thighs.

One of these draperies is of an intense crimson color, the other one is green with a yellowish pattern on it, and one is a rich dark blue. These figures are crouching and kneeling on a seashore. I believe a meadow is how it's described in the original text, and Etty has included some patches of green on the ground, some fronds, and flowers in addition to sand and shells. One of these female figures is turned toward us. One is shining profile playing a liar, and one has her arms raised vertically towards the sky.

Then in the relative distance behind them, you have a ship containing a cluster of male figures that are all semi-naked. We know they're all male because they're very, very, very muscular. One shows his face, so we understand that he's important. His arms are behind his back, one of his legs is bent, the other is stretched towards us so it seems he's being restrained by the men around him.

Lastly, next to the female figures on this meadow seashore, to the right of them, there's a third group consisting of a lifeless body, a skeleton or two, and a rotting corpse. Without knowing anything at all about the subject of the painting, it's quite clear that these female figures are responsible for the death and the carnage next to them.

Anna Reid: Cora, how was the painting received by its original audience?

Cora Gilroy-Ware: I think critics all agreed that this was a very striking picture. There wasn't a general consensus that these figures were particularly beautiful. You have one critic saying that "in fact, they're anything but two beautiful," and we're not quite sure whether or not there was something inherently distasteful, unattractive about their perfusions of flesh.

Another response was, the women in the painting just were mere academy models and that they weren't sufficiently idealised. And again, another critic said that they had more in common with the showgirls at the Greenwich fair, but overall, people were impressed, critics were impressed with the painting and its grand scale.

Anna Reid: Cora, can you tell us a little bit about how you feel that Etty adapts and alters and transforms the text and Mary, could you comment too.

Mary Beard: It's probably useful to go back actually to Homer's original text and to remind ourselves of the story in his words. The translation we've chosen is Emily Wilson's recent translation of the *Odyssey*, which is very up to the minute and I think has become very popular partly because it refuses to euphemise the *Odyssey*. So it's one of the very, very few translations where, when Homer talks about slaves, we call them slaves, not servant girls. [chuckles]

[music]

Susanna Hawker: First, you will hear the Sirens. Who bewitch all passersby. If anyone goes near them in ignorance and listens to their voices, that man will never travel to his home and never make his wife and children happy to have him back with them again. The Sirens who sit there in their meadow will seduce him with piercing songs. Around them lie great heaps of men, flesh rotting from their bones, their skin all shriveled up.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Etty has used the Latin name Ulysses rather than the Greek name Odysseus, but in the ancient text, he's warned by Circe of the danger presented by the Sirens. That's right, isn't it, Mary?

Mary Beard: Yes, she is. Circe is the lady with whom Ulysses or Odysseus has recently been dallying, an extremely alluring witch, [laughs] and it's she who tells him how he can manage to hear the song of the Sirens without actually ending up a corpse.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Right, so Etty has painted the moment at which Ulysses Odysseus himself sees the Sirens, but he's also included the corpses that Circe had warned him about on the sand next to the group. To Etty's contemporaries, this group of decaying and decomposed bodies was actually the most disturbing aspect of the picture, far more than the naked female bodies.

One critic complained of the cluster of putrid corpses and skeletons in the foreground that it was depicted with, "Loathsome fidelity. The surgeons will be in raptures. Indeed, the picture is only fit to adorn a dissecting room." It's not just the inclusion of this kind of gore, it was the scientifically precise and detailed way in which it was painted.

Other critics insisted that Etty just shouldn't have included the group. They complained about the way that the corpses lessened the beauty and charm of the Sirens, which obviously completely misses the point, that the beauty and charm of this Sirens here has an additional function, that it kills.

Mary Beard: I think it's interesting that you've always got a problem when you're an artist and it goes back right to the ancient world itself, of how you're going to show these Sirens. They are both so alluring, but they're also half-woman, half-fish.

Anna Reid: Yes, I was going to talk to you about that, actually. Could you talk a bit about the iconography of the Sirens in the ancient world?

Mary Beard: Mythological creatures in the ancient world, they always present a problem for artists then like they do now, but very frequently, the Sirens are represented as you mostly find them in literature as hybrids, half-animal, half-fish, and half-woman. And of course, that gives you a very, very different sense of what underlies the story, because when they're there as if they were slightly awkward mermaids, what you focus on is actually the idea that this is the alluring voice.

I think a lot of artists take the next step and they become just extremely attractive women, of which the voice is obviously one part, but actually, this is the body of women as well as the voice of women that is so catastrophically attractive to men.

I think here, you've mentioned, Cora, the way that the only bits of clothing they have as some wafty bits of colored drapery. That's partly an alibi for Etty for making the women, not mermaids. You can just half-imagine that he's disguising their fishy bottoms, but really, this is pushing the myth on and saying it is the body and all the attributes of woman that is so deadly.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: What's striking to me about Etty's Sirens is just how human actually, and how earthbound they appear. The gravitational weight of their bodies on the ground and they have these soft bulbs of flesh that protrude around the knees and hips, which are actually very satisfying to look at. Each one has a different hair color, which makes them seem like more three British women than three mythological creatures.

Mary Beard: I often wonder what people who didn't know the story of the Sirens would make of this painting. It's always struck me that this was one of the highlights of the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition in 1857. The myth of that exhibition, still the biggest exhibition of painting that has ever been in this country, the myth of it is that the benevolent factory owners trained their workforce in to get a site of this exhibition.

I wonder what on earth someone coming from a background where they didn't know what this classical story was, and you know being brought in forcibly by your master to see great art and what you see is this. You think, what on earth must you have thought. [chuckles]

Cora Gilroy-Ware: I wonder if those audiences would have been horrified by the figures or whether or not they would have been inexorably drawn to them.

Mary Beard: I don't think we have any reliable reactions from those outside the kind of critical circle. I imagine them saying, "So that's art then?" [laughs] "All right. I get

it. I see." The juxtaposition of those rather aggressively alluring naked women with the dead bodies, I think it's troubling actually.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: And it's so against the grain of contemporary conceptions of femininity as well. I also wonder if that fit in line with extant stereotypes of the annihilating nature of female body and female sexuality during the 19th century. Etty was the foremost painter of the nude figure during the Regency and early Victorian periods. Throughout his career, the nude, particularly the female figure, but also the male body, remained his favorite thing to paint - standing, reclining, bathing, dancing, alone, or arranged in groups. This painting is really characteristic in this respect.

Mary, in your documentary, *Shock of the Nude*, you spoke of that tendency to use classicism as an alibi for painting eroticized images of the naked body. Could you just talk a bit more about this idea of alibi and how you view it in relation to Etty and his use of classicism?

Mary Beard: I did say classical mythology is often, it gives you an excuse, a learned excuse, for looking at naked flesh, and I think it would be naive to think otherwise. Somehow, naked females are fine as long as you can call the Naiads or Dryads and give them a pedigree whether in Homer or in Ovid. The classical world, whether it's literature or art, has always been a place where you can read about sex and still tell your mum.

I think that what's interesting to me here is there's a strange clash. Because if you look back to the boat on which Odysseus is being restrained so that he can hear the beautiful voice of the Sirens, and when I look at the almost larger-than-life figure of Odysseus on that boat, I'm half-seeing the famous sculpture of the Laocoön in that, the bound figure. Although he's bound with ropes and Laocoön was being strangled by snakes. There's something very much that classical Baroque male figure in that.

When you come to the Sirens, that's both in their shape, in their attitude, their upfront alluringness, that's something which is quite different from what you find in the representation of the classical female body in the ancient world. There's a strange mismatch for me here between the figure of the male hero, who is right out of textbook classicism, and the women represented, obeying the logic of the classical text but being visually completely different.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Yes I mean that's the standard line about Etty is that he does away with that convention of adhering to the proportions of sculptures like the Venus de' Medici, for example, that you mentioned in your documentary, that he embraces the body of the living model. And this is his radical intervention into contemporary art, that he does away with the classical ideal.

But actually, I think that there's something more complex going on. I think that, in a way, this painting is classical, and it is idealised, and that group is a take on The Three Graces. Apart from the pose, they have those "small, delicate breasts" of the ancient sculpture. Some of the paintings by Etty have these large breasts, which is, I think, really interesting.

I think there is a tendency to overstate Etty's departure from the classical ideal. But having said that, his fixation on the living model does produce these bodies that are of slightly flashier, more irregular, and more particular than your standard de-eroticized classical nude in mythological history painting of the previous generation. These aren't naked bodies. They're still nudes and they're still classical nudes.

What Etty's doing is he's taking this [unintelligible 00:16:23] et cetera, and he's amplifying and heightening that sensuality. The models that he employed and he allowed to enter the pictorial space were sex workers, a lot of them, or modeled to avoid sex work, and all of them were from working-class backgrounds. This is something that is alluded to in the criticism of his works, that these women have no place in this rarefied classical imagery.

Actually, with the Sirens, one critic said they had more in common with the showgirls at Greenwich Fair than the mythological creatures of antiquity. There's this kind of dormant and troubling sexuality that they possess.

Mary Beard: I suppose, now, we do tend to look at these classical female naked sculptures, and to see them in some ways as rather de-eroticized and in contrast to what that he's doing here. Of course, actually, that was certainly not the case, those who looked at those classical sculptures in the 18th century, they were seen in highly erotic terms in the ancient world itself.

Just the same story gets told of those people who modeled for classical sculptures or just the same insinuations "has he used a prostitute to base the image of the goddess Aphrodite on." However formally different, I think, these figures are, the ideology and the difficulty and the awkwardness is very much in a continuum from the ancient world.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: On a theoretical level, so at late 18th century, that sense of de-eroticizing patently erotic images is something that's going on all the time, and people are obviously constantly trying to justify these sensual depictions of naked bodies by saying that they're pure, and they're virtuous, and they're inspiring. Actually, what Etty does is he-- although he's moralising about his art at the same time, he makes no attempt to downplay it or make it chaste.

Mary Beard: I think even the whole project de-eroticizes is a backhanded look at how you eroticize really. I have to confess that when I first saw it in Manchester, it

has been quite recently beautifully restored and partly, its size, and you say, "Oh, gosh. Really? Are you serious?" When you get over that and observing people in Manchester Art Gallery looking at it, I have to say Cora they don't treat it quite as seriously as we're treating it. I am afraid I have to promise you that.

Underneath it, is this question of, what is it to represent? This encounter between a bound man and some deadly half-human beings who are the most attractive, insinuating, treacherous women you can have, what is a convincing representation of that? I think that, "In what sense does this painting help me understand what's going on here?"

When I'm in my pro-Etty moods I think, "Well, look, it really does actually. There is something which is quite terrifying here because I know that Odysseus, he might survive this encounter, but he's actually going to get home with none of his crew alive. This is one chapter on the way to almost total disaster, which our hero, who's here totally dependent on the crew of his ship, which our hero survives but nobody else does.

You have to question the heroism of Odysseus. What's a hero when he loses all his crew? [laughs] That doesn't sound very heroic to me. As well as being part of a tradition of the most, in your face, misogyny that Greek literature can come up with and it can come up with plenty, there's also a questioning of that figure in the background. What he's up to and in what way this is part of an ultimately rather poignant disaster narrative.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Yes I mean It's quite clear that the Sirens are the ones who have the power. That's where the exaggerated muscularity of the figures appears impotent because it's no match for the Sirens' beautiful appearance and the way this beautiful appearance is suggestive of their sweet irresistible song.

Mary Beard: But I can sort of flip that and I can say, "What are these women doing?" All they can do is try [chuckles] to attract passing sailors. There's a kind of desperation in some ways, the way they put their arms out, the way they say, "Come and get me." We know in the end that the Sirens are not the heroes of this story.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Are they the heroes of this painting though, do you think that they--?

Mary Beard: I think that it's very hard to make them that when you've got the corpses and the bones next to them. Because without them, it's a completely different painting.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: We were going to talk about the male body. I was really interested in Mary's point about the Laocoön. This is post the Elgin Parthenon Marbles acquisition. What that did was that musculature, and male musculature, and

anatomy acquired this new importance among contemporary painters of mythological scenes because the figures from the Parthenon were heralded as possessing a more detailed and scientifically raw anatomy than the previously cherished works of ancient sculptures that represent the male body like the Apollo Belvedere, for example, in the Vatican.

What's interesting, and I think we see this really clearly in this painting, is that this renewed investment in anatomy didn't extend to the female body at all. Actually, female forms were seen to be infinitely less beautiful if they possessed a more detailed and more accurate anatomy. The soft plains of flesh that characterise the Sirens, completely uninterrupted, contrast so strikingly with the male figures in the background, which every tendon, every muscle is represented. Although I wouldn't necessarily say the Parthenon Marbles are a direct influence from the figures, Etty was making studies after them and was interested in them.

The figure of Ulysses has got this rather strange face, which is kind of a different color to the rest of his body, sort of ashen and it doesn't seem to match his rippling golden developed body. Actually, one critic complained that they didn't understand why he looked as if he'd taken the laughing gas. [chuckles] I think this is an expression of discomfort, tension between the physical strength of the men and the Sirens, who I would still think are the kind of locus of power in the painting.

Susanna Hawker: Soon, our well-built ship, blown fast by fair winds neared the island of the Sirens and suddenly the wind died down, calm came. Some spirit lulled the waves to sleep. The men got up, pulled down the sails, and stowed them in the hollow hold. They sat at oar and made the water whiten, struck by polished wood. I gripped a wheel of wax between my hands and cut it small. Firm kneading and the sunlight warmed it, and then I rubbed it in the ears of each man in his turn. They bound my hands and feet straight up right at the mast. They sat and hit the sea with oars. We traveled fast, and when we were in earshot of the Sirens, they knew our ship was near and started singing.

[music]

Anna Reid: Odysseus. Come here. You are well-known from many stories. Glory of the Greeks. Now stop your ship and listen to our voices. All those who pass this way hear a honeyed song poured from our mouths. Their song was so melodious, I longed to listen more. I told my men to free me, I scowled at them, but they kept rowing on.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Is this a depiction of male bonding in a way against the evils of the feminine seduction? The bro code, the bromance, the boys save their friend from danger?

Mary Beard: Yes, and I think just to some extent that's what the original Odysseus story is. It's very easy to write off the Odyssey as if it's so old it must be unsophisticated, but the Odyssey itself is raising all those kind of issues. In the end, this is the boys, they're helping the boss, but in the end, the boss won't save them. There's tragedy in the background there, and in the end, the people who are going to be the danger turn out not to be [laughs] the Sirens, they turn out to be Odysseus's own misplaced heroism, which in the end ends up saving himself and nobody else.

Anna Reid: Can we talk about skin color and flesh tone in the painting?

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Well it's typical of that tendency that we see in ancient and modern art, post antique art of expressing gender difference through skin tone. This is something we see a lot in Rubens, for example, who is one of Ety's primary influences. The emphatic whiteness of the Sirens and then that sunbaked, amber corpse on the ground next to them. The frescoes in Pompeii and Herculaneum are one example that comes to mind, but I'm sure there are lots more.

I was just wondering given the time period, this is really the point at which racial science and white femininity had long been fetishised, but there's a particular fixation on the beauty of white European women that's emerging at this time and is being described in scientific language.

In my book, I quote Charles White, the aptly named pioneer of racial scientific literature, who lavishes praise on the "bosom of the European woman, with its plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipped with vermilion." I think that description perfectly complements Ety's portrayal of the Sirens rosy flesh. But at the same time, I don't think it's fair to claim that this painting is a celebration of a racialised ideal of white femininity.

I think there were contemporary artists, and Benjamin Robert Haydon, for example, who was very much invested in racial science, but Ety had absolutely as far as I know no interest in that, and what's more, painted sensitive and I think quite empathetic portrayals of black models as well. I think there's perhaps something too that intense blinding whiteness of these bodies that maybe, I don't know.

Mary Beard: Although, it's also self-defense, isn't it, because it's a deathly whiteness. It is not a whiteness that you're ever going to have or enjoy, in fact, it's a whiteness that is devoted to killing you. The admiration of that white female flesh, which I think underlies quite a lot of the paintings that you've been talking about, in a sense, Ety is helping you challenge that, in a way.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Interesting.

Anna Reid: Mary, can you comment on the relationship between the Sirens and the natural forces depicted in the painting?

Mary Beard: I think you've got a question here about what destruction is about the relationship between nature and culture? A storm is brewing, isn't it? Look at the sail of the boat and look at those clouds. You've got a question about, is the destructiveness of the woman, is that an analog for the destructiveness of nature? Is nature female? In the end, Poseidon, the god of the sea, is going to have a lot to do with this. He's aggressively alpha male.

You are being asked the question, particularly when you see those very dark clouds against that raised arm of one of the very white Sirens. You're thinking, "What is destruction? What is going to ruin this guy? What is going to ruin those men? What's the relationship between the uncontrollability of the natural world and the uncontrollability of the woman?" Because ultimately within Greek mythology, why women are dangerous, is that you can't ever tame them quite, you can't quite get them under control.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Definitely. I'd add to that though this painting was created at a time in which industrialism was rampant and inescapable. And Etty wrote that he wanted his painting to be a retreat from the "din of commerce and the rattle of railways." The image of the female body and female fecundity offered an escape and maybe even a resistance to technological progress, so that's maybe a stake in the way that that relationship between nature and culture is coming across here.

Mary Beard: Are they clouds or are they smoke?

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Very good point.

Anna Reid: What is it about Etty's works and their sensuous depictions of the classical body that makes them so engaging to the contemporary eye?

Cora Gilroy-Ware: I think more than ever, I'd say that we live in a body-obsessed culture. Even if we don't go looking for it, all the time we hear phrases like "body positivity" and now "body neutrality," but even that's the fixation on the body, or "plus-size." We just all the time get the sense of how important health and wellness and fitness have become. I think something about Etty's obsession with the body feels familiar and comfortable, but at the same time, his art as art is completely unfashionable and out of step. It has this charming kitsch quality to it. As scandalous as his portrayals of nudity may have been to his contemporaries, they weren't actually progressive in any way. They were quite reactionary. So I think his words represent a dead end for painting, and maybe there's something appealing about that too.

Mary Beard: I almost 100% agree with Cora. Still, the idea of Odysseus, the idea of the hero, the idea of the man trying to get home, tempted by women on his way to get home is still hugely important in contemporary art. But it's, of course, been reformulated and what you find much more and what you find, for example, in the translation of the Odyssey that we've been listening to is a sense that, as well as all that, there's an imperialist narrative here. That Odysseus, he's the proto imperialist. He's coming through all these places and getting off scot-free, exploiting, moving on, blinding and killing in a way that for many artists, African Caribbean or African American artists, have been really really powerful, whether that's Romare Bearden or...

Cora Gilroy-Ware: The Black Odyssey series came to mind.

Mary Beard: Amazing. Yes, or Derek Walcott.

Cora Gilroy-Ware: Yes of course.

Mary Beard: We can't any longer quite picture the Odyssey like this, and I think in that sense, it is a dead end. That's why it seems kitsch, and we can't really process it, but I think we're processing the Odyssey and these scenes, and the importance of the relationship of that kind of oar mythology to our own culture, we're processing that in new ways.

[music]

Anna Reid: Thank you to Mary Beard and to Cora Gilroy-Ware. If you'd like to see William Etty's, the Sirens and Ulysses for yourself, it can be viewed online as part of the Manchester Art Gallery collection. Cora's book, *The Classical Body in Romantic Britain*, is published by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and distributed by Yale University Press.

Emily Wilson's 2018 translation of the Odyssey is published by W. W. Norton & Co., the reader was Susanna Hawker. This Seikilos Epitaph with the Lyre of Apollo was composed by Lina Palera via the Free Music Archive. William Etty and the Classical Body was produced by Miranda Hinkley and was a Loftus Media production.

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