

Which ancient vase inspired John Keats to write his famous 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'? **Tim Chamberlain** traces the elements of inspiration which fired the poet's imagination

The elusive urn

Inspiration is often a mysterious and sometimes an elusive thing. For the artist it is the trigger, the starting point of creativity. Sometimes the end obscures that beginning and maybe it is not even the artist's original point of intention. Keats's Grecian Urn is an intriguing example. 'Which vase inspired John Keats to write his famous Ode?' is a question frequently asked of the curators in the British Museum's Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities.

This is a deceptively simple question which has been pondered by many writers and archaeologists. In answering it, however, we find ourselves looking into a kaleidoscope of historical and creative perspectives. It is a well-documented fact that Keats (1795–1821) was

a regular visitor to the British Museum, so it seems natural to assume that its collections played an important part in informing the poet and his burgeoning interest in Classicism. The art and the antiquities which the young Keats saw here were for him the raw material of inspiration. They bolstered his reading of the Classics, giving him first-hand visual motifs of the Greek myths and, of course, the epic narratives of Homer. His love of 'Hellenism' was also fuelled by his friends and fellow artists. It was just such a friend, the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1846) who first brought him to see the Museum's most remarkable and, at that time, its most recent acquisitions – the Elgin Marbles.

The Parthenon sculptures had been acquired by the British government from Lord Elgin in 1816 and by an Act of Parliament were deposited 'in perpetuity' in the British Museum. Haydon himself had been a champion in the cause of their acquisition, having seen in them 'that combination of nature and idea which I had felt so much wanting in high art'. Haydon had high hopes of the inspirational potential of these Classical sculptures for British Art. He brought his students to the Museum to study and draw from them; likewise, on 2 March 1817 he brought Keats, hoping that the Marbles would inspire the poet. Keats's initial reaction, however, was somewhat contrary to this hope: 'Haydon! forgive me that I cannot speak/Definitively on these mighty things.' His instinctive response was to write two sonnets addressed to his painter friend, describing the creative inadequacy he felt at seeing the Marbles. Artistically this is but an expression of awe pushed to the limits of creative comprehension. How could any artist match such peerless achievement? 'Such dim-conceived glories of the brain/Bring round the heart an undescrivable feud.' Even Haydon's usually more bombastic ebullience was stayed for a moment as he wrote in his diary: 'The more I study them the more I feel my own insignificance. [...] I had made sketches, but when I saw the originals I felt a pain at the comparison, mine being so very inferior.'

Some time elapsed between Keats's first viewing of the Parthenon sculptures and his writing of the famous 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. Time for reflection, as the Ode gives a more measured and thoughtful reaction to a work of antiquity. So, was this Urn also an object Keats had seen in the displays at the British Museum? Keats's description is certainly clear enough for us to seek out its template in the Museum's catalogues. However, the search is not entirely fruitful. Indeed, it would seem that inspiration can be as fragmentary as the remains of the antiquities themselves.

Keats was not thinking of a Greek vase in the traditional sense of a painted black or red figure ceramic, rather he was thinking of a sculpted shape of the type which is actually Roman rather than 'Grecian'. That he had such a form in mind is overtly implied in the line: 'O Attic shape! ... with brede/Of marble men and maidens overwrought.' Clearly Keats was very taken with such a piece of antiquity and his familiarity with the type is also readily attested to in many of his other poems – most notably in his 'Ode on Indolence'. As for the Grecian Urn, there is a vase in the Museum's collection, known as the Townley Vase, which matches the scene described in Keats's Ode, but it is only a single aspect of his Urn. The 'mad pursuit' clearly



A Grand Vase from Piranesi.



A Marble Vase in the British Museum.

Far left: A Piranesi Vase, engraving by Henry Moses, 1814;

left: The Townley Vase, engraving by Henry Moses, 1814



By John Keats.



Left: The Sosibios Vase, as drawn or traced by John Keats (Keats-Shelley Memorial House, Rome); top: John Keats, by Benjamin Robert Haydon, sketches dated November 1816 from the artist's journal (National Portrait Gallery, London); above: *The Sosibios Vase*, by Henry Moses, 1814



Above: Temporary Elgin Room in 1819 by A. Archer, showing Benjamin Robert Haydon on the far left

depicted on the Townley vase matches Keats's description but lacks the ceremonial of the procession to a sacrifice mentioned later.

In 1923 the publication of a drawing of a marble vase, drawn by Keats himself, revived the literary hunt for the Urn's source of inspiration. At the time Paul Wolters, a German professor of archaeology, identified the vase in Keats's sketch, which is now in the Keats Shelley Memorial House in Rome, as an 'amphora of Pentelic marble worked by the artist Sosibios'. He pointed out that this vase was merely a 'prototype' for Keats's drawn vase, as it is unlikely that Keats ever saw the actual Sosibios vase since it was then in France, a country Keats never visited. There are also discrepancies in the details of Keats's drawing and those on the vase. Therefore, Wolters concluded, Keats must have derived his adaptation of the vase from another drawing, probably one published by the Piranesi brothers from the Musée Napoléon.

Yet another plausible model for Keats's drawing was found in 1965 by a 25-year-old research student named Noel Machin, who discovered an engraving of the Sosibios vase with similar discrepancies of detail, done by Henry Moses in 1814. Interestingly, Machin noted, delving further into the pages of Moses' book of engravings, that there were representations of two other vases which match the scenes in Keats's Ode. One of these is none other than the Townley Vase. While all these

Right: View of Townley Vase, showing 'What men or gods are these?', The Townley Vase; far right: 'To what green altar, O mysterious priest, / Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies', Parthenon Sculptures, South Frieze, slab xlv

drawings of real ancient vases can lay claim to some aspect of Keats's version, none of them affords a direct comparison. Even the second of the vases found among Moses' engravings, described as 'A Grand Vase from Piranesi', is not a true mirror to Keats's Ode despite its matching minutiae. It shows a 'mysterious priest' at a tripod and a heifer, but the heifer is not 'lowing at the skies'. This line however leads us neatly back to where we started our search – the British Museum and the Parthenon sculptures. Here we find a 'heifer lowing at the skies' being lead in the procession of the Panathenaea.

It's not a great stretch of the imagination to picture Keats standing before this section of the Parthenon frieze in the Temporary Elgin Room in 1817. Its frozen instant, a 'silent form' which 'dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity', impressing itself upon the poet's memory, so that when later leafing through a book of engravings, thoughts were mixed and impressions eventually all came together, the visual combination stirring him to create his own composition of such 'mighty things'.



expressing that quintessentially Romantic ideal that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'.

Art, and in this instance poetry, is a sea fed by many inspirational rivers. In looking so closely at the material sources of inspiration for Keats's Ode we should not overlook the many literary sources, from Classical literature through Elizabethan to those contemporary with Keats, which set the poem in its own literary tradition or context. In an article on the Ode, Thurman Los Hood perceived elements within the poem which appear to owe much to Milton, Spenser, Shakespeare's Sonnets and the writings of Lord Shaftesbury. I.B. Cauthen Jr went even so far as to claim that Homer's description of the shield of Achilles in Book 18 of Chapman's translation of *The Iliad* was Keats's greatest inspiration in the writing of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. Ultimately though, we would do well to remember that in the pursuit of a poetic truth, every poet has a proverbial licence.

Keats's Grecian Urn is essentially his Grecian Urn. It seems almost certain, given the unlikely union of two disparate set pieces of imagery – the wild Dionysian revel and the sober Apollonian ceremonial – that no single match will ever be made. But that is very probably the whole point. Keats's Urn is an ideal. A notion of beauty, which in contrast to the transience of our own lives, is unchanging and transcendent.

The marbles of Pheidias have transcended time to speak to us, to tell us of truth and beauty. In their astonishing intricacy and detail they inspire us still. Keats's Ode shows us the great value that is not only inherent in the Marbles themselves, but perhaps also the great value which is intrinsic to their position in a Museum of and for the world. Both show us the power of inspiration which is embodied in and continues to live on through the collections of the Museum, transcending the distant past through the present and on, into the future. Inspiration embodied 'in perpetuity'.

The Parthenon Marbles are on display in Room 18, the Townley Vase is on view in Room 83.

