

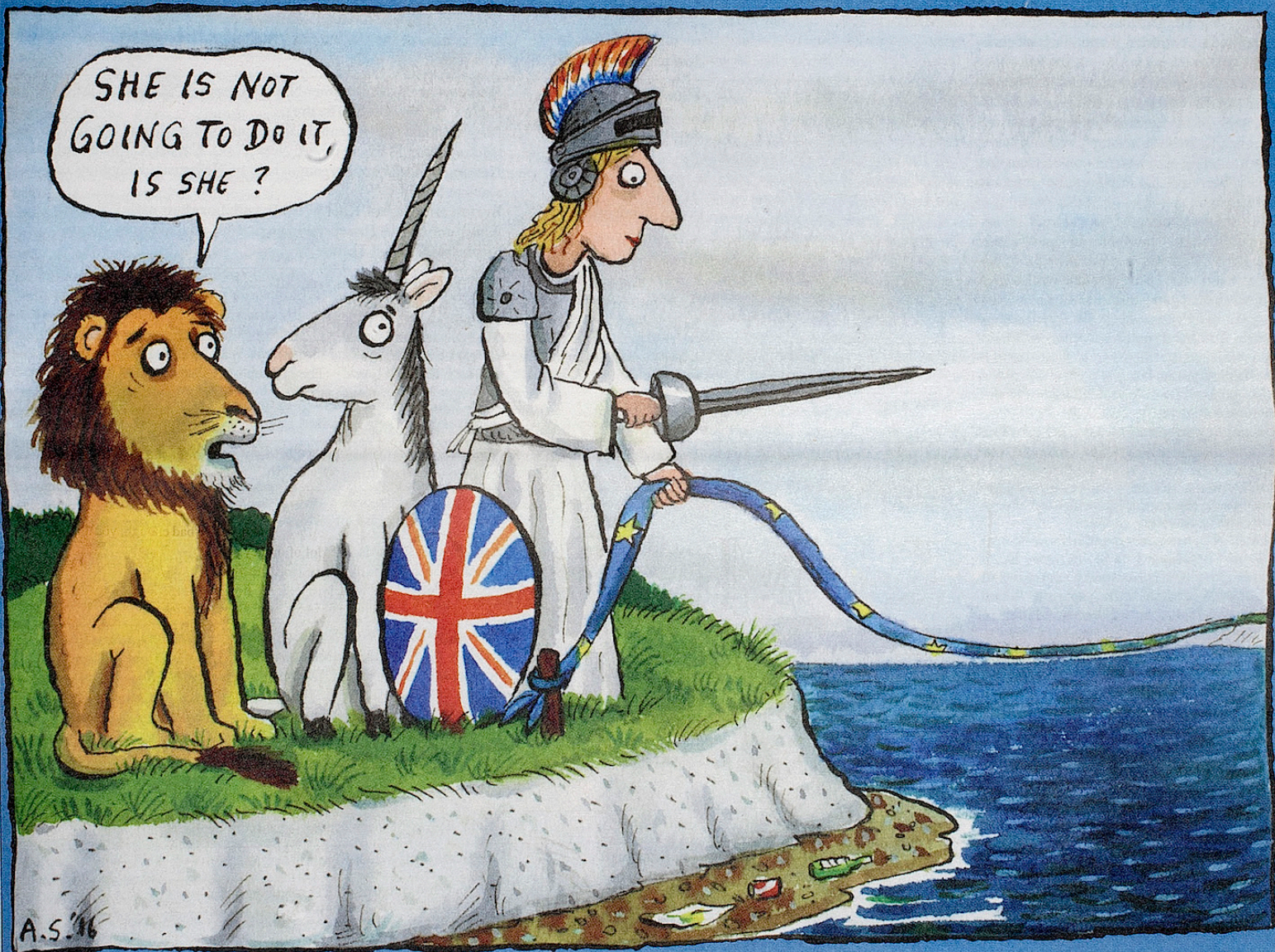
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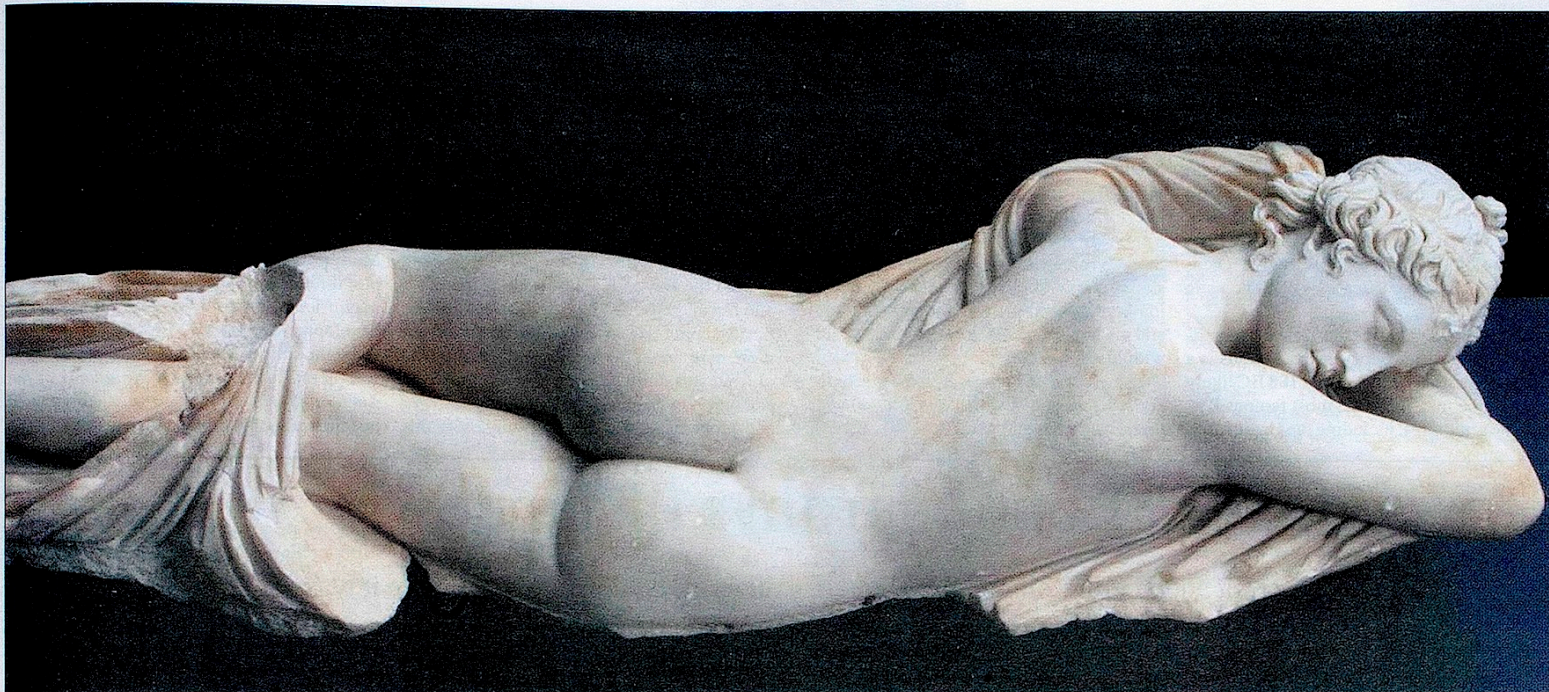
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## Culture and the EU

Leading figures on the referendum and the liberal arts





Sleeping Hermaphrodite; a Roman copy, from the first half of the second century AD, of a Greek original from the second century BC

## The first cosmopolitans

The preoccupations of Hellenistic civilizations, as reflected in their art

Often, short titles are best: *War and Peace*, *Moby-Dick*, *Born To Run*. But the new exhibition on Greek art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has an unusually long title: *Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World*. This sprawling name arises from both the large ambitions of the curators of the show and the simple difficulties in defining the scope of Hellenistic painting, decorative arts and statuary.

Art historians agree that the Hellenistic period began around 335 BC with the rise of Alexander the Great, but there is little consensus as to when it ended. In 30 BC with the death of Cleopatra, the last Ptolemaic ruler in Egypt? Or much later, since masterpieces in Hellenistic style continued to be made for at least another 200 years? Equally challenging is the immense geographical sweep of Hellenistic civilization, which spanned from Greece to Italy, India and Egypt, and had many centres, not just one. It was the first cosmopolitan era – indeed, the word *cosmopolites*, or citizen of the world, was coined about the time of Alexander – and the age saw, as never before, the movement of patrons, the migration of artists and the far-ranging transport of works of art, both as goods for trade, and spoils of war. The Greek dialect *koiné* was spoken from one end of the Mediterranean to the other; similarly Hellenistic art formed a common visual idiom, shared throughout the known world.

The colossal scale and the ill-defined boundaries of the subject make it impossible to cover in a single exhibition, and no museum has ever tried. While far from comprehensive, the show at the Metropolitan

ANDREW BUTTERFIELD

PERGAMON AND THE  
HELLENISTIC KINGDOMS OF THE  
ANCIENT WORLD

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,  
until July 17

Carlos A. Picón and Seán  
Hemingway, editors

PERGAMON AND THE  
HELLENISTIC KINGDOMS OF THE  
ANCIENT WORLD

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Museum of Art is the first major international loan exhibition to attempt to give a broad survey of many principal themes of Hellenistic art. In his introduction to the catalogue, Carlos Picón, the chief curator, calls it “unabashedly an ‘objects show.’” Yet the objects have been chosen not only for their splendour but also for their importance as illustrations of Hellenistic culture, especially its respect for learning, its delight in luxury and its worship of martial valour. The result is a deeply engaging exhibition that is regularly filled with visitors who pass slowly through the galleries with rapt attention. Nonetheless, such are the complexities of the field, caused for example by the interplay of styles and motifs from different regions, and the fact that so many original works of Hellenistic art are lost and today known only in ancient Roman copies, that repeated viewings are necessary to grasp some basic aspects of the show.

A primary focus is the kingdom of Pergamon in northwestern Asia Minor, where art and culture flourished under the Attalid dynasty from c.282 to 133 BC. This concentration is prompted in part by the recent closing of the Pergamon Museum in Berlin for renovation; in consequence the Metropolitan has been able to borrow from Berlin nearly a quarter of the 265 items in the show. A more important reason for the focus, however, is the central place of Pergamon both in the history of Greek and Roman sculpture and in the modern recognition of Hellenistic art as a field worthy of study. Pergamon was the site of one of the greatest sculptural monuments of the ancient world, the Great Altar, with its gargantuan frieze of the battle of gods and giants, and the city’s rediscovery by German archeologists in the 1870s helped cause a major reevaluation of Hellenistic art. It was not an exaggeration when Carl Humann, the first director of the excavations, exclaimed, “We have discovered an entire artistic epoch!” Since the eighteenth century, later Greek art had been seen as excessive and decadent; it now began to be viewed instead as its own era, and one fundamental for the development of Roman, Renaissance and Baroque painting and sculpture.

Although the title might lead one to expect that the other major kingdoms of the Hellenistic world would also have a significant place in the exhibition, Seleucid and Ptolemaic art is little represented here. Instead, it is the late Roman republic and early empire that occupy a place almost as large as that of Pergamon in the show, and both the first and last rooms feature works mostly found in Italy at Pompeii, Herculaneum, Taranto and other sites. This is

due to the Roman conquest of Greece in the second century BC, after which, as Paul Zanker writes, “Rome became . . . the center of the Hellenistic world”. Just as high-ranking Romans turned to Greek philosophy, literature, and oratory for models of how one should think, write and speak, so they looked to Greek painting and sculpture for examples of how they should decorate their temples and villas. At first they simply stole Greek art, when following the sacking of Corinth in 146 BC and other such acts of predation, they brought home vast quantities of the region’s treasures; but by the first century BC they were buying so many works in Hellenistic style that countless Greek artists moved to Italy and set up shop there. The end of Hellenistic and the beginning of Roman art are inextricably mixed, and how a work from Italy in the time of the Caesars is categorized can be partly a matter of whether it was made for public (Roman) or private (Hellenistic) display.

To tell the complex story of Hellenistic art, the show begins with a gallery dedicated to works celebrating Alexander the Great and his generals, the so-called *Diadochi*, who founded a series of kingdoms around the rim of the eastern Mediterranean. Alexander cast a spell over all of antiquity, and his exploits were depicted in texts and images for hundreds of years after his death. The works in this room, mostly from Italy, show him fighting Persians, killing lions and performing other valiant deeds of heroic action.

The next four galleries are chiefly about Pergamon. After a brief introduction to the early history of the excavations there, the focus is on the Attalid patronage of high cul-



ture. A colossal statue of Athena Parthenos from the library at Pergamon, one of the most important centres of learning in the ancient world, dominates the gallery. The curators have surrounded this sculpture with works representative of Greek literature. To her left are busts of Greek philosophers, to her right works that commemorate Homer, and behind her sculptures related to theatre and drama. Hardly any of these objects are actually from Pergamon; rather, the point is to give a general idea of the preoccupations of Hellenistic civilization.

The next two galleries illustrate the glorification of war. The victory of the Attalids in a series of wars between 233 and 188 BC likely inspired the making of the most famous Pergamene sculptures, including the Great Altar,

and the celebrated statues of dying Gauls, Persians, Amazons and giants that the Attalids set up in Pergamon and Athens. A small selection of Roman copies of these statues is displayed here, and the altar is represented by a photo mural of the altar's great gigantomachy frieze, now in Berlin, as well as a fragment from the Telephos frieze from its interior, and some of the statues from its roof. Yet one of the most powerful works on view in these rooms is also the smallest: an exquisitely wrought bronze roundel from Thessaloniki of Athena as a war goddess; wild-eyed and dishevelled, she looks utterly ecstatic with lust for battle.

The next section presents the decorative arts, such as gold jewellery, silver tableware, portrait cameos and glass. It is only here that

works from Ptolemaic and Seleucid kingdoms have a significant presence, and comparing the sumptuous items made there with the comparatively crude examples from Italy, it is easy to see why the east was seen as a realm of unequalled luxury.

The last gallery of the show is largely about the absorption of Hellenistic art in the Roman world. There are statues of amoral refinement, made by Greek artists for the pleasure gardens of villas in the hills outside Rome and around the Bay of Naples, such as the Satyr and Hermaphrodite, the Borghese Krater and the Sleeping Hermaphrodite. But also on view here are sober and imposing portraits of Augustus, Julius Caesar, Pompey the Great and others, who all aspired to equal the power and glory of Alexander. One niche off this

gallery with sculptures and other objects found in ancient shipwrecks underscores the point that huge quantities of art were sent from Greece to Italy during the Hellenistic era.

Since at least the time of Fernand Braudel in the 1960s, there has been a tendency to analyze the history of the Mediterranean as a unified entity. Perhaps no institution in America has done more to advance this view than the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which over the past three decades has mounted a sequence of magnificent exhibitions examining major developments in the history of culture throughout the Mediterranean basin. *Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World* is the latest, distinguished instalment in this outstanding series.