

Hercules objects at the Ashmolean

- The Greek hero Herakles, better known to us by his Roman name Hercules, was the son of the god Zeus (Roman god Jupiter) and the mortal Alcmene.
- He acquired great fame through his heroic deeds and twelve labours and was worshipped as a god by individuals and communities throughout the known world. Endowed with god-like strength, but susceptible to human vices such as drunkenness and anger, Hercules occupies a unique place in ancient and modern thought and imagination.
- His stories and images spread across the ancient world and have been the subjects of drama, poetry, music and art from the earliest Greek epics to the present day.
- Objects in the collection showing Hercules cross cultures, continents and time, illustrating the lasting appeal of this classical hero and cover the ancient world, India and Renaissance Europe.

Other galleries containing Hercules

Gallery 21: Greek and Roman Sculpture, bay 9 : 'Easton Neston'

Gallery 7: Money, 'Greek gods and heroes' and Roman coins, statue of Hercules in front of a temple

Gallery 6: Rome 'gods and goddesses'

Gallery 15: Italy before Rome: 'Etruscans as craftsmen' and 'personal adornment' examples of finger rings

Gallery 44: European Art, table top bronze of Hercules and the lion

Gallery 7: Money

1. Silver Greek coin, showing Hercules wrestling the Nemean Lion



When Hercules grew up he performed twelve difficult labours which earned him immortality. Many of these deeds are illustrated on coins, reflecting their significance in Greek mythology.

HCR 6274

Gallery 16: Greek World

2. Athenian black-figure stamnos (storage jar) Vulci, Italy, about 460BC



The deeds of Hercules were popular subjects for Athenian vase painters from 600-400BC. Here, Hercules slays the Egyptian king Busiris, who was sacrificing all strangers to Zeus to relieve Egypt from famine. Other pots nearby illustrate further scenes showing Hercules.

AN1896-1908 G.270

Gallery 14: entrance to Cast Gallery

3. Arch of Trajan at Beneventum, AD114



Cast of a sculpted relief of the arch, dedicated to Trajan by the senate and people of Rome illustrating different aspects of the Emperor's care for his people and the empire. Hercules is represented on the far left amongst the most important gods of the Roman pantheon. His role here is of imperial protector and grantor of military strength.

A 152-154

Gallery 12: Rome

4. Marble statuette of Hercules. Roman, AD100-200, inspired by a Greek bronze statue of 500-400BC



For his fourth labour, Hercules captured the enormous Erymanthian boar and brought it back to King Eurystheus, who was so frightened that he hid in a large jar. Here we see Hercules resting, having killed the boar.

AN1928.529

Gallery 14 : Cast Gallery

5. Casts of four reliefs from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia 470-450BC



The scenes show the moment just before or just after a 'labour' has been completed. Clockwise from the right side, the labours depicted are: the fight with the Nemean Lion, the killing of the Stymphalean birds, the cleaning of the Augean stables and the retrieving of the apples from the Garden of the Hesperides.

A67 A66 A69 A70

Gallery 12: India to AD600

6. Bronze statuette of Hercules resting, Bactria or Gandhara 100BC-AD100



The hero god Hercules with his club, seated on the flayed body of a lion. Alexander the Great's military campaigns spread Greek culture and language to Egypt, Anatolia, the Levant and parts of Asia including India. This statuette of Hercules was created in the Greek style.

EA1999.31

Gallery 43: Italian Renaissance

7. Hercules and the Nemean Lion, marble, Florence, dated 1518



Hercules struggles with the Nemean Lion that terrorised the citizens of Nemea (Greece). This was the first of his labours. Here, the hero prises open the jaws of the beast.

WA 159.44

Gallery 43: Italian Renaissance

8. Hercules, bronze, probably by Camello (Vettor di Antonio Gambello, about 1460-1537), Venice about 1500-1530



The muscles on this bronze figure capture the tension and relaxation of naturalistic movement and the facial expression emphasises the psychological. Like sculptors of the Hellenistic period (about 300-30BC), Renaissance artists focussed on the facial expressions of their subjects.

WA 1899.CDEF B413

Gallery 44: European Art

9. The Choice of Hercules, 1712, Paolo de' Matteis (1662-1728)



The hero Hercules has to make a moral choice between Virtue who gestures towards a rocky, uphill path or the seductress Pleasure. The 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury who commissioned this painting, instructed the artist to show that Hercules would choose Virtue, but only after a struggle.

WA1980.92

Gallery 49: Britain and Italy

10. Roman Capriccio, Giovanni Paolo Panini (1691-1765).



Panini's fantasies of Rome brought together famous ancient buildings and sculptures in imaginary settings of magnificent ruins. These paintings were popular with British visitors as souvenirs of their sight-seeing in Rome. This painting includes two statues of Hercules, one shows Hercules fighting the Hydra.

WA 1946.265

Lines of enquiry: Classics

- Research the different stories about Hercules across different cultures and times. How are they similar or different?
- Create a diagram showing the links between Greek and Roman gods and goddesses.
- Research different representations of Hercules in Greek sculpture, architecture, vase paintings and coins.
- What does this reveal about Greek values, culture and society?
- How have stories about Hercules continued to be represented in objects over time?

Working with objects: key questions

- Who made it?
- Where and when was it made?
- What materials is it made from?
- How was it made?
- What was it used for? How was it used?
- Who used / owned it?
- How might it be interpreted by different people? at different times?



Greek coin showing Alexander the Great portraying himself as Hercules.

Lines of enquiry: Art & Design

- Research different media and techniques used to represent Hercules in the Ashmolean's collections.
- Explore a range of classical images of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines. Compare and contrast different approaches.
- Develop your own image of Hercules from the stories about him. What medium would you choose? Which part of the story would you show?
- Explore the context and setting of classical sculpture in public and private spaces. What are the contemporary equivalents? How are they similar or different?
- Compare and contrast the public representation of heroes today.

Further resources (more ideas here)

Cast Gallery

<http://www.ashmolean.org/departments/castgallery/research/>

The Beazley Archive:

<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/tools/default.htm>

Cross curricular links

- History: rise and expansion of the Greek empire
- Literacy : explore myths and legends about Hercules
- Literacy: what is the legacy of Greek poets, philosophers and dramatists today?

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