

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

## Teaching Support Sheet

**presenter:** Leah R. Clark

**work:** Fifteenth-century plaquette of *Apollo and Marsyas*, British Museum, 1915,1216.111

In this short film, Dr Clark examines a plaquette housed in the British Museum. There are a variety of activities to get students thinking about close-looking around a Renaissance object. There are also different themes that you can use to tease out some of the main issues the film raises: visual analysis of a small low-relief sculpture; the Renaissance's relationship to antiquity; collecting practices in the Renaissance; the relationship between a copy and an original; circulation of visual images.

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-plaquette-apollo-and-marsyas-15th-century-british-museum>

### *Before watching the film*

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Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work [here](#) that you can use to show to your class.

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=76734&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=76734&partId=1)

Question to ask your students before watching the film (students to complete on the attached form)

1. What do you know of the Renaissance as a time period?
2. What do you think this work/object depicts or represents? Describe what you see on the screen. (you might think of things like scale, how a viewer might interact with the object, or even use it) Can you identify any recognisable elements (plants, humans, animals, landscape features, architectural details, forms)?
3. How are the bodies rendered? Are they natural? Idealistic?
4. What function do you think this work serves/might have served?

### *After watching the film*

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Questions to ask your students after watching the film.

1. What effects (aesthetic, social, political etc) do you think the artist and/or patron was trying to achieve in this work?

While the plaquette copies an antique gem (dated from around 30BC), this plaquette was created in the fifteenth century by an artist who was inspired by antiquity. The patron of this work—a collector—would have chosen to collect such an object because it was carried antique associations.

You can find an image of the original antique gem [here](#).

2. Does it have a recognisable purpose or function? Does this relate to the time period in which it was made?

Plaquettes are small metal objects that collectors would often keep in their studies. It depicts a Greek mythological subject matter—the story of Apollo and Marsyas. The plaquette actually copies an image that appeared on a famous antique gem that was highly sought by Italian collectors in the fifteenth century. We don't know much about this particular plaquette, but there are numerous versions of it. That's because it copied an ancient gem, and any collector who was keen on knowing and acquainting themselves with antiquities, would be eager to have a copy. This is in a period when there are no photographs, so instead of googling an image, collectors would collect these small objects as a way to acquaint themselves with antiquities.

Plaquettes could be like this one—a singular object to collect, but some were made into hat badges or belt buckles, so it could also become an accessory to wear.

The original patron was probably a humanist or collector, or even a court ruler, who might collect original gems, but also copies, if they couldn't get a hold of an original one. The gem that this copies was extremely sought after and at the same time, and was extremely expensive and rare.

3. Has the film helped you define some of the formal elements of the work/object? Consider scale, subject matter, medium, and other formal elements. What are the material properties of the object? What is it made out of?

This plaquette is made out of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. (you can find more information on how plaquettes were made under further resources)

Bronze is a metal that was fairly expensive in the Renaissance. It was usually reserved for large public sculpture, but could also be used, as we see here, in small little collectible objects.

**-scale:** it is very small, and the figures even smaller. But this would allow a fairly close and intimate engagement with the object. It is about the same size as a 2penny coin.

- Length: 4.1 centimetres
  - Width: 3.4 centimetres
- this plaquette doesn't have anything on its back (or reverse) but some did have an image on both sides.  
The style is classical.

More on iconographical details:

**Who were Apollo & Marsyas?**

If you look closely at this image, you can see two main figures

-one holds a lyre—that is a musical instrument—and is standing up straight

-the other is seated and there's a tree behind him, where you can just make out a pipe hanging from the tree.

In Greek mythology, Marsyas boasted about his musical abilities and challenged the God Apollo in a musical contest. Apollo won, and because Marsyas dared to compete with a God, Apollo gave him his just reward, which is rather gruesome. He was flayed alive, attached to a tree.

If you consider the **formal elements:**

-the two individuals are mostly naked. The artist has used this opportunity to show off the detailed and fairly accurate anatomy of the two individuals.

Apollo, the God, stands up in a pose that is typically classical—it's called a **contrapposto** pose. It's a term in Italian that means counterpose. It is a sculptural scheme, originated by the ancient Greeks, in which the standing human figure is poised such that the weight rests on one leg (called the engaged leg), freeing the other leg, which is bent, and it provides a movement to the body, so that the person depicted doesn't look too rigid. This provides an S curve to the body.

-because it's in bronze it's a bit shiny, and this means that if you move it, it can pick up light in different ways to show the contours.

4. How has this film helped your understanding of Renaissance mythology and the Renaissance's relationship with antiquity?

-open ended

5. What is its relevance for today?

This plaquette is housed in the British Museum today, although there are similar plaquettes in museums around the world.

It's important to study as it gives us insight into collecting habits in the Renaissance and collectors relationship to antiquity—how they sought knowledge through material objects. But it also gives us insight into how images circulated in the Renaissance. Without photography, this was a way to copy and know works of art.

Comparative analysis

You could compare this plaquette with the *Laocoön* (film with Kathleen Christian on Open Arts Objects: <http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-laocoon-group-vatican-museums> ). In this case you could relate both objects to the Renaissance's relationship to antiquity, but highlight the difference between an actual antique work (*Laocoön*) and one that copies an ancient work (plaquette). You could also tease out the difference in scale (life-size vs miniature). Both objects were collector's objects, although one was monumentally displayed in the Vatican, while the other probably housed in a collector's study. Another possibility is to compare this with the Benin plaque, also one of our films: <http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-benin-plaque-showing-fa%C3%A7ade-royal-palace-1550%E2%80%931650-british-museum>

<b>Fifteenth-century plaquette of <i>Apollo and Marsyas</i> British Museum, 1915,1216.111</b>	<b><i>Laocoön and his Sons, Vatican Museums, Rome</i></b>
-copy of an antique gem, 15 <sup>th</sup> c	-original antiquity found during the Renaissance
-bas-relief	-3D sculpture
-bronze	-marble
-very small object	-life-size
-depicts mythological story of Apollo and Marsyas; at moment before Marsyas is flayed	-depicts mythological story of the Trojan priest with his sons at the moment of being attacked by serpents
-unknown original location, but probably in a collector's study	-found in ground, then placed in the Belvedere courtyard, collections of the pope at the Vatican

-idealistic proportions but also naturalistic	- idealistic proportions but also naturalistic
-some dynamism in the composition	-extremely dynamic
-in fairly good condition; the hole has been plugged	- in fairly good condition; the arm restored as it was missing when discovered in the ground
-related to collecting practices in the Renaissance and the revival of antiquity; humanist interests in antiquity	related to collecting practices in the Renaissance and the revival of antiquity; humanist interests in antiquity
-this is one of many copies of the original antique gem	-this is the original, but gave rise to numerous copies

### Online Activity

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1. Search the image/collection of database of a museum (the Victoria and Albert Museum, The British Museum, The National Gallery in Washington, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY) using the term 'Apollo and Marsyas'

What do you find? What kinds of medium did you find the image in? What dates were the works you found?

2. Now do the same search for 'Apollo and Marsyas plaquette' (you can even do this on google image search)

What kind of observations you can make from your findings? What objects did you find? Are there differences between them? If it looks like the same object, can you discern differences in terms of material, visual appearance? Where are they located? What do they date from?

Some observations: You'll notice that there are numerous plaquettes of the Apollo and Marsyas in existence today, many dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This just demonstrates how ubiquitous the image had become, but also how it had been copied across media.

Students should be encouraged to do a close analysis of two objects that look similar, for instance, two plaquettes housed in different collections or in the same museum. They might pick up on the fact that one object is pierced with a hole, while the other isn't. They might also pick up on the quality of the cast—where some parts can less accurately cast than others.

For example, [this plaquette](#) in the Met has the inscription LAV.R MED on the left hand corner. This is because the original gem belonged to Lorenzo de' Medici and he had his initials carved into the original gem. Some plaquettes then soon circulated with this inscription as a way to signal Lorenzo's ownership.

Further Info:

On plaquettes:

Leino, Marika. *Fashion, Devotion and Contemplation: The Status and Functions of Italian Renaissance Plaquettes*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013.

On plaquettes and collecting practices:

Clark, Leah R. "Transient Possessions: Circulation, Replication, and Transmission of Gems and Jewels in Quattrocento Italy." *Journal of Early Modern History* 15, no. 3 (2011), 185-221. [to request a free copy, click here: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/37733/> ]

Clark, Leah R. "Collecting and Replicating Antiquities: Casts, Substitutions, and the Culture of the Copy in the Quattrocento." *Journal of the History of Collections* (2014): 1-13. [to request a free copy, click here: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/41418/> ]

On Collecting practices in the Renaissance:

Christian, K. W. (2010) *Empire Without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c.1350–1527*, London and New Haven, Yale University Press.

Clark, L. R. (2013) 'Collecting, exchange, and sociability in the Renaissance *studiolo*', *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 171–84 [to request a free copy, click here: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/37732/> ]

Findlen, P. (1989) 'The museum: its classical etymology and Renaissance genealogy', *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 59–78

On casting bronze plaquettes:

<http://www.szepmuveszeti.hu/techniques/bronze-casting-of-bronze-plaquette-1210>

Further information on the most famous ancient gems of the fifteenth century in the Medici Collections:

[http://www.palazzo-medici.it/mediateca/en/Scheda\\_La\\_collezione\\_di\\_gemme\\_nel\\_Quattrocento&id\\_cronologia\\_contenuto=2](http://www.palazzo-medici.it/mediateca/en/Scheda_La_collezione_di_gemme_nel_Quattrocento&id_cronologia_contenuto=2)

Renaissance Resources online

<http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/> : This is a comprehensive site on a number of different issues related to the Renaissance provided by the National Gallery in Washington, DC

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/r/renaissance/> : This is a comprehensive site on a number of different issues related to the Renaissance provided by the National Gallery in Washington, DC

### Comparative Analysis Table

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