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To Draw Viewers, Museums Show That What's Old Is New Again



The Farnese Sarcophagus, circa A.D. 225, inspired a new video work by the artists Marc Downie and Paul Kaiser. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston exhibited them together in a recent show. Credit Credit Exhibition and Graphic Design by IKD; Photo by Benjamin Kou, via Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

By Geraldine Fabrikant

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The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston recently mounted “[Life, Death & Revelry](#),” an exhibition that juxtaposed two works: an elaborate ancient Roman sarcophagus and a video it inspired. The artists Marc Downie and Paul Kaiser, who collaborate as [OpenEndedGroup](#), took thousands of digital photos of the sarcophagus and plugged them into their proprietary algorithm to create a new video work.

“My goal was to show that historic art can inspire new works; art of the past is not dead,” said Christina Nielsen, who just left her post as curator at the Gardner to become director of the art collections at the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, Calif. In “Common Threads: Weaving Stories Across Time,” another show she oversaw at the Gardner, the composer David Lang created a 50-minute opera to be listened to on headphones rather than performed. It was inspired by five of the museum’s 16th-century tapestries.

These are scarcely the only recent exhibitions that have presented works from two seemingly unrelated periods. “[Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination](#),” at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, sprawled throughout the museum’s medieval galleries, as well as the halls of the Cloisters, in an approach that underscored the cultural underpinnings of the clothing.



A frame from “Maenads & Satyrs” (2018), the video by Mr. Downie and Mr. Kaiser, which used thousands of digital images of the sarcophagus. Credit Marc Downie and Paul Kaiser/OpenEndedGroup

As Andrew Bolton, head curator of the Costume Institute, explained it: “You want to provide a contextual framework for the fashions. The past informs the present, and the present informs the past: How does a 19th-century corset affect a Jean Paul Gaultier corset?”

Across the country, at institutions like the Getty Villa in Los Angeles, the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World in New York, and the Tampa Museum of Art, curators are increasingly melding works from different periods and in different media.

Just last summer, the Tampa Museum commissioned the artist Patricia Cronin to create “Aphrodite Reimagined,” a cold-cast marble-and-resin sculpture based on a fragment in the museum’s own collection. The pieces are exhibited together in the [current show](#) “Patricia Cronin, Aphrodite and the Lure of Antiquity: Conversations With the Collection.”

“The juxtaposition of artworks and artifacts can help the viewer stop and think,” said Sheena Wagstaff, chairwoman of Modern and contemporary art at the Met. “Great artists are never just referring to the 20th century.” For instance, “Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture 1963-2017,” a show now at the Met Breuer, includes a tiny Cycladic marble female figure and a Minoan bronze statuette of a votary that illustrate the influence of ancient art on Mr. Whitten’s work.



An ensemble by Thierry Mugler in “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination,” a show at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that linked centuries-old religious tradition with contemporary style. Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

This concept is not new, of course, and it may well be easier to accomplish at encyclopedic museums that have the resources to combine works from different periods and of different media, as the Met did three years ago with “China: Through the Looking Glass,” which explored the impact of Chinese aesthetics on Western fashion.

But today, museums are more aggressively seeking to show the relationships between periods. Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, said that they were “thinking more actively about ways to connect their historical collections with contemporary art.”

There are myriad reasons. The prices paid for modern works dominate the headlines, so there is value in integrating contemporary pieces with older ones to remind visitors and museum supporters of the allure of all periods.

“New developments within the contemporary-art scene make news much more quickly than they did in most of the 20th century,” Dr. Potts said. “For historical collections not to engage or respond to that activity and show how it relates to their collection would be missing an important part of contemporary art history.”



The Getty chose Jeff Koons’s polychrome aluminum sculpture “Play-Doh” (1994-2014) for a show about how contemporary artists had engaged with the philosopher Plato. Credit Jeff Koons, via J. Paul Getty Trust

Dr. Potts recalled a particularly provocative show in Berlin some years ago: “Giacometti, the Egyptian,” which debuted at the Staatliche Museum. The sculptor was obsessed with ancient Egypt and did many drawings of Egyptian pieces. However, “unless you knew Giacometti well, you did not know how much ancient Egypt influenced his work,” Dr. Potts said.

The Getty Villa recently mounted “Plato in L.A.: Contemporary Artists’ Visions” to illustrate how modern-day sculptors engage with Plato. The Getty commissioned some of the 11 works, by artists including Jeff Koons, Rachel Harrison and Paul Chan. Others were lent, including [“Play-Doh,”](#) Mr. Koons’s massive multicolored sculpture of polychrome aluminium.

While the sculpture show was in the Villa’s exhibition space and not integrated with the collection, other museums are combining ancient and modern works in single, far smaller exhibitions, as the Gardner did with the sarcophagus and the video.

“Visitors may be more inclined to want to see contemporary art, but we have a mission to our collections,” Ms. Nielsen, the former curator there, said. “There is a fundamental

imperative to show objects from the past as markers of social history. Young people today are disinclined to look at anything older than a couple of decades. They just don't think it is relevant to their life. But if museums can make the point that people have always had the same priorities, they can relate."



Patricia Cronin's "Aphrodite Reimagined," a cold-cast marble-and-resin sculpture that she based on an ancient fragment at the Tampa Museum of Art, which now has a show pairing the works. Credit Patricia Cronin Studio; Photograph by Philip LaDeau

In some cases, a museum takes the initiative, but in others, the artists' own curiosity establishes the connection. For example, the Turner Prize winner Elizabeth Price became intrigued with the archives at the Ashmolean and Pitt Rivers Museums at Oxford and realized that Arthur Evans, who did the crucial work at Knossos, the Minoan site on Crete, was largely interpreting what he believed life had been like in that era.

Ms. Price then created a video that used his drawings to create her interpretation of a Minoan world. The Institute for the Study of the Ancient World in New York used her video in a show of objects from the Minoan era. Jennifer Chi, at that time the director of exhibitions at the institute, pointed out that history is always interpretive, so Ms. Price was simply adding another layer of interpretation.

Artists, of course, are students of the past, and many are deeply immersed in art history. In 2002, for example, Ms. Cronin created "[Memorial to a Marriage](#)," an elegiac piece that refers to early Etruscan works. For her exhibition at the Tampa Museum, the curators paired her "Memorial" with the museum's own Etruscan funerary urn. "It is a smart concept to get people to engage in different periods of art that they don't know about yet," Ms. Cronin said.

For Seth D. Pevnick, chief curator at the Tampa Museum, melding periods can lure visitors to worlds they might not otherwise consider. "People say: 'I am not interested in those old cultures. They are dead,'" he said. "And I can say, 'But look at what they inspired.'"

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