

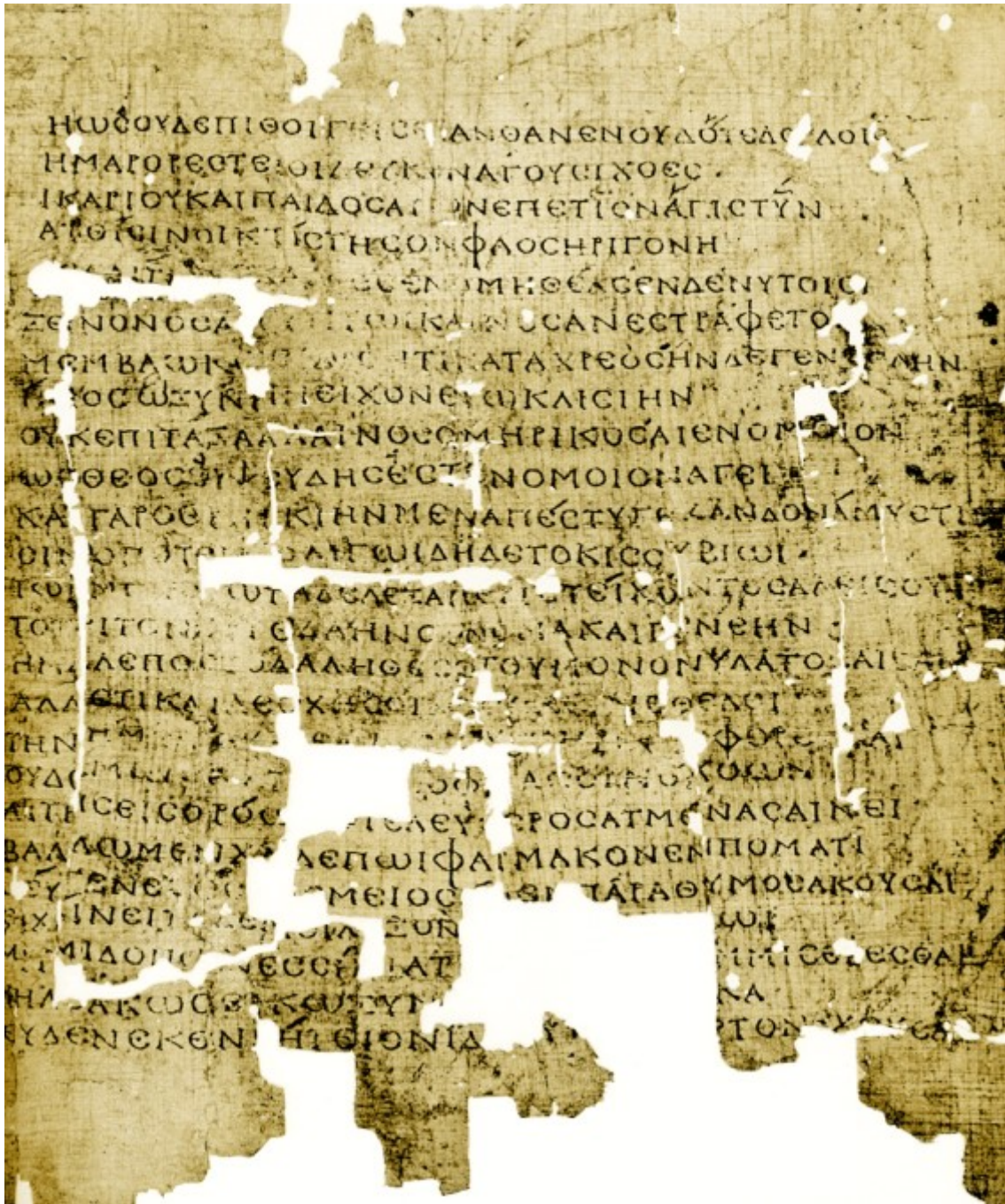
Sing to me, Muse: The Power of Museums

Posted on [31st May 2022](#) by [Antigone](#) in [Material Culture](#), [The Classical Tradition](#), [The Future of Classics](#)

Sam Anderson

As a secondary-school Classics teacher in East London, I am constantly trying to think of ways to make our subject come to life for my students. How can I complement the challenge of those irregular verbs with the excitement of a real Latin inscription? How can I wax lyrical about the beauty of Roman sculpture without diminishing the intensity of the sight of the British Museum's *Crouching Venus* for the first time? How can I ever fully convey the nature of Greek democracy without allowing them to stand on the Acropolis of Athens?

As teachers, we must try to, and of course do, succeed in bringing our Classical subjects alive in our classrooms. The very nature of our subject, and perhaps part of its greatest appeal, stems from the challenge of trying to recreate a world that is so tangible and yet so far removed from our own. However, in London we have an enormous array of very special learning resources: an abundance of free museums full of Classical history. Given the location of my school in East London, this piece focuses entirely on museums in the capital. However, the points I make should apply equally to anywhere in the world that provides access to public museums.



An unusually under-battered papyrus fragment (178 Pfeiffer) of Callimachus' *Aetia*, composed in 3rd cent. BC but here copied in AD 2nd cent. (P.Oxy. XI 1362, Sackler Library, ut vid., Oxford, UK).

In the 3rd century BC, Ptolemy I Soter (305/4–283/2 BC) founded the great *Mouseion of Alexandria*, complete with its famous library. This was the institution within which the beauty of the cicada and donkey similes of Callimachus' *Aetia*, and the paradoxical character of Jason in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, were first envisaged. It was a true 'seat of the Muses', more than a mere library certainly, and it shows us the power that such a collection of knowledge can have in society.



Entrance to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, which moved from Broad Street (the building which is now the History of Science Museum) to Beaumont Street in 1894.

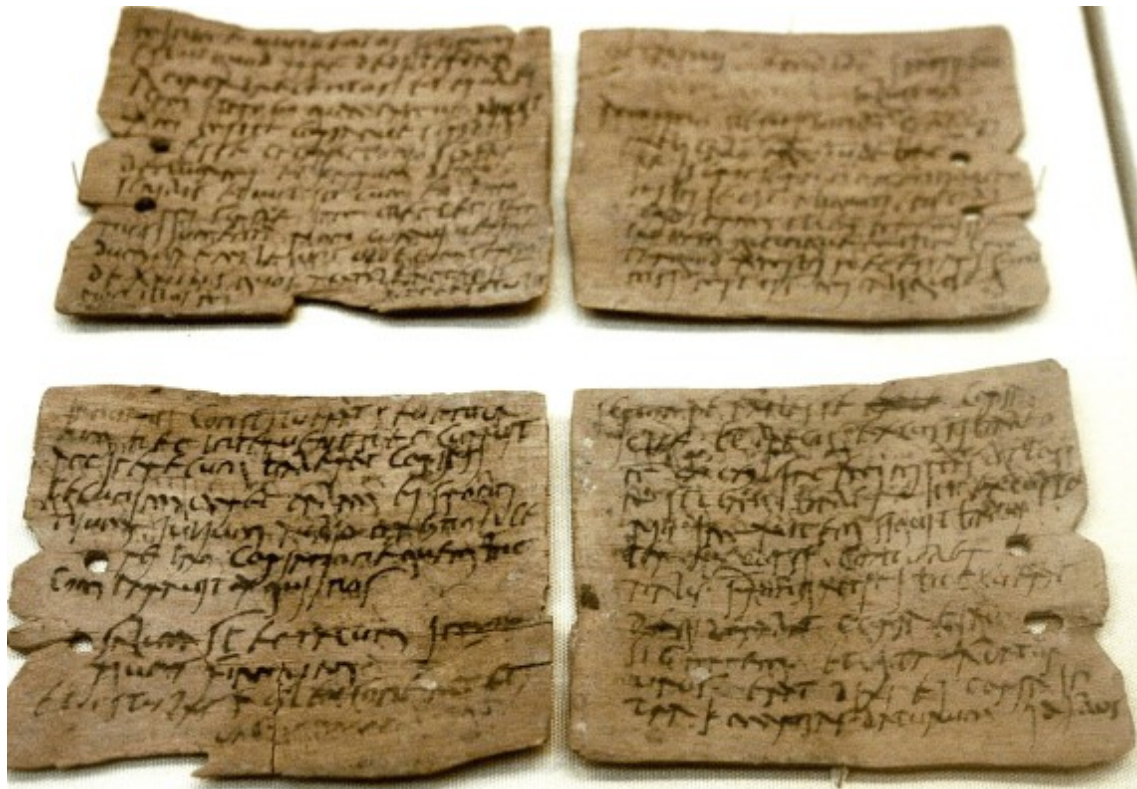
Yet it was not until the 17th century that the word *Musaeum* became popular in Europe, being used memorably in 1683 for the Oxford museum of Elias Ashmole. The fact that the Ashmolean was created out of a donation to that city's university once again demonstrates the intrinsic connection between a collection of ancient artefacts and the learning they can inspire. By the 18th century, the concept of the museum was even more established, with the first public museum in the world founded in 1753 off the streets of Bloomsbury in Montagu House. Although much has inevitably changed over the past 250 years, the British Museum is still one of the best free educational tools available to teachers and students alike.

It would be ideal if our students went to these museums in their own time, during the weekend or holiday. That would save us from the effort of organising the trip, from concerns about risks, and from disruption caused to regular school lessons. However, can we really expect this when many teachers are ourselves liable to go months without paying a visit to a museum? In any case, on trips the students have access to you, a subject expert and (hopefully reliable!) tour guide, without the distractions of their phone or the temptation of leaving early. A school trip will always be the best way to have a productive and inspiring visit to a museum.



The British Museum in London seen from above, looking north towards the entrance.

The British Museum, with its grand Ionic columns and breath-taking Great Court, is the best [place to start](#). The permanent Classical collection spans from Mycenaean Greece right through to the late Roman Empire, with artefacts ranging from the majestic horses of the [Mausoleum at Halicarnassus](#) to the wooden tablets found at the Roman fort at Vindolanda by Hadrian's wall. You can see some of the earliest Persian and Greek coins in a fascinating gallery on the history of money. You can learn about Greco-Roman attitudes towards homosexuality with objects of beauty like the silver [Warren Cup](#). The choice is endless and, given the wealth of detailed information accompanying each display, a single trip needs to choose a manageable focus.



Soldiers letter from the fringes of the Empire: some Vindolanda Tablets, written on Hadrian's Wall (near the modern English-Scottish border), 1st/2nd cent. AD (British Museum, London).

Over the past five years of leading trips to the BM, what has given me most satisfaction is the chance to see students establishing links between museum exhibits and their own studies. The gallery of Attic vases allows the myths of Ancient Athens to come alive, including the moving depiction of Achilles killing Penthesilea, with its stark contrast between the black-and-white figures and the blood red coming from her neck. The world-famous Parthenon frieze and Rosetta Stone are guaranteed to impress, and the reconstructed Nereid monument allows students better to imagine a Greek temple.



Achilles meets and slays [Penthesilea](#), Queen of the Amazons: detail from an Attic black-figure amphora attributed to Exekias, c.525 BC (discovered in the Etruscan town of Vulci and now in the British Museum, London).

In recent years, there have been several outstanding Classical exhibitions, including [Troy](#) in 2020 and [Nero](#) in 2021. These allow students to focus their explorations on a theme and on the arrangement of artefacts, both those from the BM and those loaned from elsewhere. These factors really add to the visitor experience. The Troy exhibition was extremely impressive, ranging from objects found at Troy through Heinrich Schliemann's infamous use of explosives, to John Dryden's original translation of *The Aeneid* (1697) and Filippo Albacini's sculpture *The Wounded Achilles* (1825), on loan from Chatsworth House in Derbyshire. The chance to see such a unique collection of objects, with a teacher as a guide, is an opportunity not to be missed.

As well as learning, museums are there to inspire wonder in our students, and none does this better than Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Founded in 1833 in the house of the famous architect, it is an Aladdin's Cave of Classical artefacts – the crypt of the building literally houses the wondrous sarcophagus of Seti I from the 13th century BC. The museum benefits from not having the detailed labels of the British Museum, so that students can enjoy it more like a child in a sweet shop and look at the objects first and foremost. The museum offers [excellent tours](#) for small groups, which in particular bring to life the architecture of the building alongside the art. The Soane really is the closest you can get to time-travel in modern London.



Just one of the fun-filled rooms of the Soane Museum.

Museums allow us to teach the importance and influence of Classics throughout history, and through art and architecture. The Wallace Collection, near Bond Street, encapsulates this perfectly, with its vast collection of sculpture, paintings and decorative arts. Their ‘Ovid trail’ can take you through the stories of the *Metamorphoses* shown on numerous objects. The labours of Hercules are depicted on a 16th-century Italian parade shield. My favourite is the wonderful sculpture of ‘Love Triumphant’, a perfect introduction to the discussion of love in Plato’s *Symposium*. The museum also offers some [brilliant workshops](#), including one on creative writing on mythological themes using art from the museum. I suggest that it is only by looking at the wealth and variety of art produced in response to the Classical world that students can truly grasp the rich and complex impact our subject has had on cultural history.

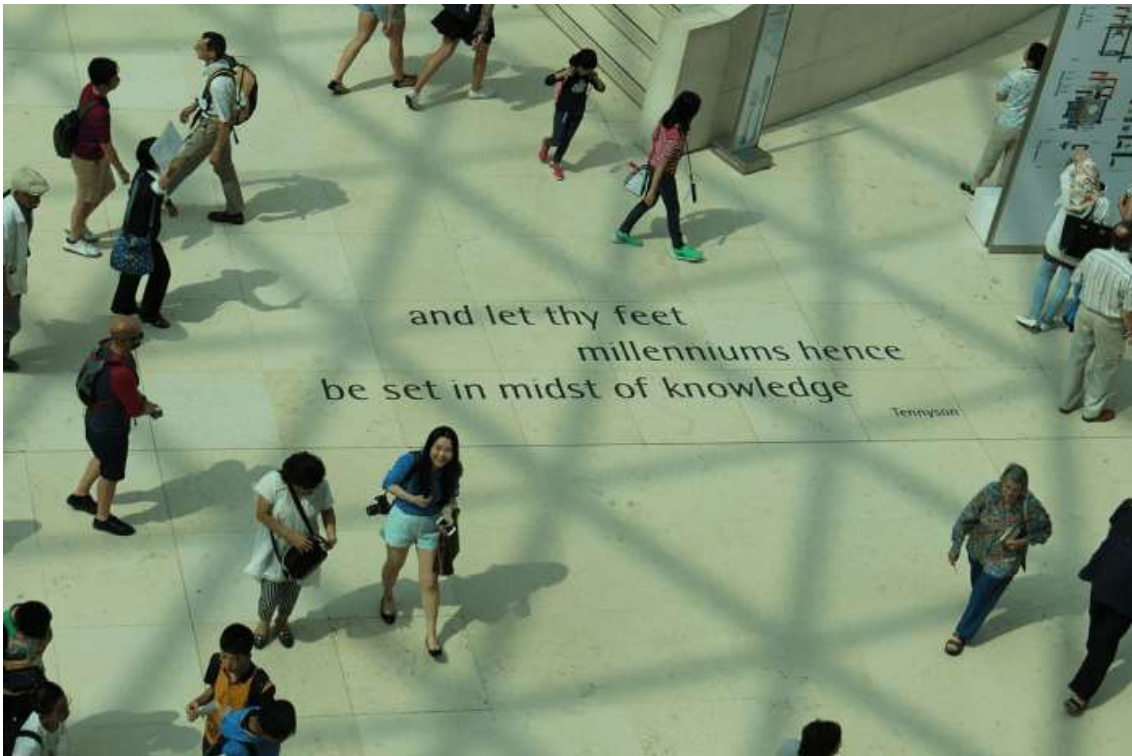
Part of this must involve opportunities to discuss the complex truth behind the presence of some artworks in our museums. It is crucial that we teach our students where objects

came from and how they came to be in one building in our capital city, in many cases far from their original homes. They should learn the story of objects like the Elgin Marbles, and indeed learn how the “Grand Tour” catalysed the acquisition of antiquities, since this contextualisation of past (mis)handlings of objects forms a crucial part of the study of Classics. Once better informed, students can engage in discussions about demands for repatriation of the kind that are [prevalent](#) in our contemporary media. They will then also have a greater appreciation of the complexities of running a museum in the modern day, as well as of the role the ancient world can still sometimes play in modern politics. Such debates go hand in hand with the students enjoying and appreciating museums as abundant sources of knowledge and interest. The most important thing I can do as a teacher is to inform them as best I can about the issues so that they can form their own opinion of how things stand.



One of the horses of Selene who drew the moon goddess' chariot, 438–432 BC (part of the “Elgin Marbles”, British Museum, London; two other horses and Selene's torso are in the Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece).

Recently, as they have been preparing to head on to other schools for their A Levels, my Year 11 Latin cohort reflected on the Classics trips we have been on over the past half-decade. It was clear that, despite the disruption of the pandemic, they really /appreciated the number of museums we had managed to visit. Some of their best memories of Classics at school came from them. One A-Level student still remembered the quotation from Alfred, Lord Tennyson carved into the floor of the British Museum's Great Court:.



“... and let thy feet, millenniums hence, be set in midst of knowledge.” Tennyson’s prescient words amidst the crowds that criss-cross the British Museum’s Great Court.

All the museums I have discussed are exceptionally accommodating for school children, with special days designated for visiting exhibitions, free workshops of incredibly high quality, places to store bags and eat lunch, and a real understanding of how to facilitate a visit of large groups of young people. Transport for London (TFL) offer [free tickets](#) for school groups and all museums are only a short walk from the nearest station. Yes, there are risk assessments to be completed and time must inevitably be sacrificed from lessons in school, but the experience gained by students will be worth it many times over. The history on display in London’s museums – and perhaps those in the city nearest you – can be an extension of our classroom: it is up to us to use it.



Sam Anderson is Head of Classics at East London Science School, a state school in Bromley-by-Bow, East London. His aim is to give every child he teaches the opportunity to become a modern Classicist, whatever form that might take. He has previously written for Antigone on the importance of keeping literature at [the heart of the Classics curriculum](#).