

Hellenic Preservation Society

of Northeastern Ohio



Collis Lecture

THE DR. JOHN AND HELEN COLLIS LECTURE

Ancient Greek & Byzantine Art,
Sunday, September 25, 2022

Reimagining Early Greek Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Dr. Phoebe Segal, Mary Bryce Comstock Curator of Greek and Roman Art, Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston

By Holly Witchey PhD

The annual Dr. John and Helen Collis Lecture returned this year with audience members gathering in person in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art. An annual event, except during the pandemic, this year the event was held in memory of Dr. John Collis (1931-2020), and the program began with a series of video testimonials from friends and colleagues. One individual spoke for many in the audience when he offered, "My life is better for having had him [Dr. Collis] in it." Heather Brown, Virginia N. and Randall J. Barbato Deputy Director and Chief Curator, welcomed the crowd gathered. She explained, that the lecture series named for Dr. Collis and his wife Helen, brings nationally and internationally recognized experts in the field of art history and archeology to discuss new scholarship, museum exhibitions, and archaeological discoveries.

Each year the topics alternate between Ancient Greek and Byzantine art. The lectures are made possible through the extraordinary Dr. John and Helen Collis Family Endowment, the first of its kind at the Cleveland Museum of Art. The endowment supports an annual lecture dedicated to a particular art historical emphasis. Additional support for this lecture comes from the Hellenic Preservation Society (HPS) of Northeastern Ohio. HPS is a non-profit organization whose focus is to preserve the Hellenic legacy that will promote the Greek experience through education, collection and

preservation. After thanking the crowd, Brown introduced and welcomed Seth Pevnick, Chair of European Art from Classical Antiquity to 1800 and Curator of Greek and Roman Art, to the dais. HPS readers may remember that Pevnick was a Collis Lecturer in 2015.

Seth Pevnick took his place at the podium and mentioned how pleased he was to be spending time in front of guests again at this in-person event. Before introducing the speaker, Pevnick noted that it was during his visit to Cleveland in 2015 that he realized the special qualities of Cleveland and the Cleveland Museum of Art. This year's lecturer, Dr. Phoebe Segal, was Mary Bryce Comstock Curator of Greek and Roman Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Pevnick and the speaker met in Greece at a dig at the Athenian Agora. Dr. Segal earned her BA from Brown University (1999) and PhD in art history and archaeology from Columbia (2007). She has excavated in Greece, Italy, and Cyprus, and is co-chair of the Museums and Exhibitions Committee of the Archaeological Institute of America. Since 2008, she has curated several exhibitions and gallery renovations at the MFA, Boston, most recently early Greek art (2022), on topics ranging from ancient coinage to the significance of unknown find spots. Her current book project, written for general public, is focused on the afterlife of two Etruscan masterpieces in the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Art (MFA Boston). Her remarks for the Collis lecture

focused on the re-installation of the early Greek galleries at the MFABoston. Taking the stage, her first remarks to the audience were: “This is my first time in Cleveland, and wow. I spent most of my time yesterday in the gallery with my jaw on the ground.” With these generous words she began her talk focusing on the reinstallation of the Greek galleries at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The collections of Greek Art in Boston are among the oldest in the United States, and as with collections at the Cleveland Museum of Art, among the most distinguished and throughout her lecture Segal often referenced works in the Cleveland Collection as they related to those in the MFA Boston. She began with an image of the new galleries that provides a foundation for the visitor to understand Greek Art. Of the many opportunities and challenges offered to any team involved in a museum gallery reinstallation, Segal called out the opportunity to learn from visitor feedback and the challenge to be responsive to the rapidly changing world around us. The results, she hopes, are galleries that are more inclusive than ever. She explained that in the reinstallation process they were determined to be more outward-facing, visitor-centric and collaborative. And the results, Segal noted, were deeply satisfying. It was a team effort that included many stakeholders--curators, conservators, installers, scholars, colleagues, and the general public. Three new thematic galleries were installed first, so that the final gallery—the foundation gallery—could fill in any gaps. The thematic galleries included: The Homeric Gallery that focused on storytelling—the MFA Boston has the strongest collection of works with Homeric stories of any in the United States. The gallery space includes works with scenes from the Trojan War, the Odyssey, and several celebrated Athenian vases including an oversized drinking cup signed by Hieron and Makron (490 BCE) illustrated with images of pictures Paris Abducting Helen and Helen’s eventual reunion with her husband. Dionysus and the Symposium – this gallery focuses upon the topic of Dionysus, wine, wine-making, and events associated with the symposium. Wine making was big business in Greece, Segal noted, and the vases in the gallery feature images of winemaking, drinking games, reciting poetry, and making love. The final thematic gallery focuses on Greek Theater, with works and vases that illustrate

scenes from the canon of familiar Greek plays. She illustrated her points with a Krater displaying images from the Orestia (460 BCE) including the Death of Agamemnon.

Another gallery illustrates scenes of daily life in ancient Greece including vases with a barber cutting hair, children playing with toys, images of artists at work, and utilitarian items like loom weights. Amphora with workshop scenes 500-490 BCE. Because the BMFA includes one of the finest collections of Early Greek Gallery from the 8th through the 6th outside of Greece it was important to give visitors some frame of reference for the history of Greek art before entering the thematic galleries. And, in fact, according to Segal, Greek Art is something of a misnomer

because it perpetuates the idea that Greeks were a monolithic



group when the people identified as Athenians, Spartans, etc. Segal was able to renegotiate the remit of the gallery originally conceptualized as a chronological/regional overview. She had begun to think twice about wisdom of organizing the gallery according to the accepted art historical method. She worried that she would lose people and so she reimagined the gallery in several parts with an introductory space, and additional sections that looked at Greek art in terms of the birth of narrative in the middle of 8th century BCE, changing approaches to the human body in 6th century BCE, and the tension between the development of the various city-states and the expansion of Greek horizons through trade and colonization. Segal engaged the audience in her topic and ideas through a series of short discussions of objects from the MFA Boston’s permanent collection, occasionally interspersed with similar items from the Cleveland Museum of Art’s permanent collection. Among the many spectacular images was a gold, 9-lobed libation bowl (625BCE), the only one of its type to have survived. (phiale mesomphalos) 625 BCE, The Museum of Fine Arts Boston, and the fabulous bronze Mantiklos

“Apollo” Mantiklos “Apollo,” 700-625 BCE, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Segal used new media in the galleries to help visitors better understand what they were seeing. A 3-D animation of the temple to better understand the placement of the architrave reliefs from the temple at Assos, and a 5-minute animated video illustrating a plausible origin of how the decoration of red-figured vases might have evolved.



Architrave Relief from the Temple of Athena at Assos with a Scene of Herakles and Centaurs, c. 540–525 BC. Greek, Archaic period. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of the Archaeological Institute of America, 84.67. She discussed her collaborative work with object conservators in the ongoing restoration of a ceramic sarcophagus rim from an area near Smyrna.



She explained that while more than 100 of these exist there are only a few in American Collections (e.g. The Getty, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and at Princeton). Much research was done before conservators were able to carefully fill in gaps in the scenes depicted on the lid to make the imagery more legible. In one example she showed, a man was depicted getting into a carriage and saying goodbye to his wife and three children, imagery appropriate for a funerary monument. A fascinating portion of Segal’s lecture dealt with depictions of foreigners in Greek art. She noted that Greeks were generally curious about foreigners AND they had invented the word xenophobia (dislike of people from other countries) for a reason. Although she did point out that there is evidence for at least 20 foreign cults in Athens, and that foreign artists and craftsmen sometimes signed their works noting their nationalities. According to Segal, an important part of the installation was a series of interviews done with college students who spoke about the importance of ancient cultures. She reminded the audience that college students are the bridge between youth and adult, and that it is important for us to listen to the voices of young, passionate people. She closed by saying she hoped her work at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston would be an inspiration for future generations who visit the museum.