



“The resting place of Hirst’s imagined ship rings true with what we know about connectivity between ancient cultures”

Recently when in Venice I visited the Damien Hirst exhibition *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*. It’s a polarising affair – people either love it or hate it. Most focus on whether any of it is ‘true’. The conceit is that a sunken vessel from the first century AD found on the Indian Ocean seabed has been brought to the surface by Hirst, its amazingly varied contents exhibited for all to see once more.

It’s a good yarn, with clues to the contrary littered throughout (‘Made in China’ stamps on the back of some of the artwork, the occasional Mickey Mouse and Transformers sculpture, even the artist’s self-portrait). This is art for a ‘post-truth’ – or perhaps ‘return to ancient myth’ – world. The putative ship was called *Apistos* (‘untrustworthy/unbelievable’). Of course it was.

What struck me, though, were the insistent themes of globality. Hirst’s story about the ship’s resting place rings true with what we know about connectivity between ancient cultures in the early first centuries AD. The Red Sea and Indian Ocean were busy with ships plying back and forth, conducting trade – in silk, pepper and other spices, for example – between the ancient Roman, Indian and Chinese worlds.

Hirst’s collection of ‘artefacts’ spans a variety of ancient cultures, from Greek to Roman to Egyptian to Indian and beyond, all of which were in deep and constant contact and exchange. In fact, ancient global exchange dates much further back in time than the first century AD. The Uluburun shipwreck – dating back to the 14th century BC (1,400 years before Hirst’s supposed find) and found



off the coast of Turkey in 1982 – was laden with more than 18,000 luxury objects from a myriad of different Mediterranean and Asian societies.

But Hirst also extends the theme of globality forward through time. His ‘trove’ includes an Aztec calendar stone – even though that would date from around 1,400 years after his supposed shipwreck – linking the New World into his ancient global maze. He also creates connections between eras and worlds through the very fabric and style of his work. His man on horseback assailed by serpents is sculpted in Michelangelo’s favourite Carrara marble but evokes the famed Laocoön sculpture of Roman antiquity. This is not random: it was Michelangelo who was called on in 1506 to authenticate the Laocoön statue when it was found in Rome (conspiracy stories suggest he faked the work himself).

Real-world connections across time are immortalised in these new creations. But so are connections that never existed. His sculpture of the mythological Andromeda and the sea monster features a shark popping up ready for the

kill. It shouts *Jaws*, and reminds us of Hirst’s own pickled-shark creations – from ancient myth to the 21st century, connecting time and space in one object.

The exhibition is spread across two spaces: the Punta della Dogana and the Palazzo Grassi. The Dogana is the site of the customs house that received tax from all trade goods from the 15th century on – a time when Venice, end point of the Silk Roads from China, ruled the waves of the eastern Mediterranean. The Palazzo Grassi, meanwhile, was the last palace to be built on the Grand Canal before the Venetian republic fell, and is therefore the final emblem of a glorious period of Venice’s internationality and global power. The objects on display – created, forged (and faked) as they are, creating connections between cultures and times near and far – find a comfortable, apt home and context within these most connected of buildings within this most connected of cities.

Of course, we can’t forget the people who throng to see it. On my visit I was surrounded by a cacophony of voices speaking many different tongues: a global community looking at objects that speak to a connected ancient past, and create real and imagined links between global spaces and times. I don’t think I have ever seen a better metaphor for today’s world. Post-truth or myth? That misses the point. What you experience here is the overwhelming, sometimes frightening and illusory, but always exhilarating connected reality of our humanity. 🌐

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