Four Stories

writers respond to

Prayers in the Desert
by William James Müller

and Vanity
by Helen Chadwick

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Mr Chishti and curator, Dr Rebecca Bridgman discussing 'Prayers in the Desert' in its former location in Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery's Round Room.

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Introduction

The city of Birmingham's museum collection consists of around 800,000 items, displayed and stored in nine venues and attracting over one million visits a year. Acquired over a century and a half, it is, alongside Liverpool and Glasgow, one of the great regional collections of the United Kingdom. The collection covers art and design, human history, natural science and science and industry.

Stories help us make sense of ourselves and the world around us. In the galleries you can explore how the objects tell the stories of the city and the people who lived, travelled and worked here. You can watch Birmingham change from a small industrial town to a 21st century city, find out how the faith communities in our diverse city use objects to explain their beliefs to others, and follow how objects have travelled across continents and blended ideas from different cultures and traditions. You can imagine the stories told in the many examples of fine and applied art, and see how the crafting of ceramics, textiles and jewellery has each evolved over time in different world cultures.

'Four Stories' was developed by Dr Ruth Page and is the first project to come from the Birmingham Museums Trust Research Group. This Research Group was initiated by the Digital Humanities Hub at the University of Birmingham, and is a unique project which brings together curators and academics to develop collaborative research based on the museum collections. This book, also produced in partnership with the Birmingham Research Institute for History and Cultures, features two works of art from Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery: 'Prayers in the Desert' by William James Müller and 'Vanity' by Helen Chadwick. The eight writers who have responded to these works have diverse expertise as curators, artists, art historians, novelists and historians. Together, their reflections bring to life the historical, imagined, literary and personal stories that lie behind and run through these works.

We hope that as you visit the galleries, these stories will help you think about the objects you encounter and help you tell stories of your own.

Dr Ruth Page
'Four Stories' Editor

William Müller visited Egypt in 1838-9; he rather memorably described its population as 'like humanity put into a kaleidoscope, such is its endless variety'. Kaleidoscopes were a new invention and something of a technological sensation in the 1830s, signifying a sense of novelty, excitement and modernity.

Müller wrote accounts of his travels for the London art press, and emphasised the authenticity that his Egyptian experiences brought to his painting. At first glance, 'Prayers in the Desert' is full of details which might stake claim to precision, in its anthropological interest in religious practice, its attention to details of clothing. The bowed figure dressed in white even has dirt under his finger and toe nails - this is a painting that quite adamantly asserts its basis in lived experience, its sand blasted, camel trekking credentials.

But 'Prayers in the Desert' was painted in a London studio, four years after Müller returned from Egypt. That rolling, evocative sky thick with paint is, as Müller discussed, based on images by seventeenth-century century landscape painter Claude Lorrain. Müller's kaleidoscope of humanity was already present in London. The people are local London models in fancy dress, the dirt under their fingernails urban grime rather than grains of sand. Who were these people? Do they appear in other images, and if so, are they always devout - or indeed always (or ever?) Muslim? What stories do they bring to the painting? Were they, like so many looked-at-but-overlooked artists' models in the nineteenth century, working for artists in order to gain a foothold in the art establishment? What did they contribute to the painting?

Dr Kate Nichols

Prayers In The Desert

1843

William James Müller (1812–1845)

Oil on canvas

Presented by the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, 1881

© Birmingham Museums Trust

The landscape behind the figures in 'Prayers in the Desert' is the west bank of the Nile at Thebes, and the temple on the horizon is one of many Theban temples built or improved by Ramesses the Great. Ramesses II (1279-1213 BCE) was the third pharaoh of the 19th dynasty: he lived to be 96 and had over 200 wives or concubines, 96 sons and 60 daughters. He was equally prolific as a builder, and almost every ancient site in Egypt bears his name, titles and achievements.

The temple in the painting is one of two on which Ramesses left an account of one of his greatest triumphs, the Battle of Kadesh. The Egyptians had for many years had an uneasy relationship with the Hittites, their rival empire in Syria and the Levant. Shortly after ascending the throne, Ramesses began to plan a campaign to restore Egyptian influence in the region. In 1274, he defeated the Hittite army under Muwatalli II in front of the great city of Kadesh, driving them into the river Orontes. It was a famous victory for Ramesses. According to Ramesses, at any rate - the Hittite version is different, and the two sides concluded a peace treaty not long afterwards.

As a postgraduate student in 1977, I excavated with a team from University College London at the site of Kadesh, now Tell Nebi Mend, near Homs in Syria. It was difficult to reconcile the story of how the Hittite army rushed out of concealment to ambush the Egyptians with the dead flat landscape around the Tell. Two years later I visited Thebes, and saw the relief of the battle on the walls of the temple. Ancient history lived for me. The temple of Ramesses in the background gives Müller's painting a significance for me that is very different from its apparent subject.

Dr Ellen McAdam

All this was a long time ago, I remember, but set down this – it had been Henry's idea from the start. Something about 'grass roots'; about 'sampling local life'.

He had arranged for robes to be brought to the hotel for us and the boys. The wives would stay behind – two nights of boredom and imported Chardonnay.

As we sashayed through the lobby I saw the receptionist sneer.

On arrival, our guide explained the various customs – the fasting and the prayers – then led us camel-mounted through the wretched heat. I saw Henry fading, but it was his boy, Thomas, I noticed most. The silk of his tunic matched his unblinking eyes.

By nightfall, Henry was sulking; broke his hunger with a smuggled flask. We slept under the silence of his mood.

The second day was even hotter – a hard time we had of it – but somehow we survived until the final afternoon.

At the dune's peak, our guide invited us to kneel. We obliged, reluctantly. He translated some farewell prayers.

Henry snapped. 'Right, enough!' Desperate to return to his suite. It was only then that he spotted Thomas, still kneeling, face low enough to kiss the sand.

'Son!' Henry's makeshift turban had begun to unravel.

But when Thomas raised his head, Henry realised – we all did – the change that had crept over the boy; the grass roots that had, somehow, taken hold.

I might have glanced at our guide. I might have caught him smiling. Though as it happened I never saw him, or Henry's beloved son, again.

Dr Ruth Gilligan

In 1881, Joseph Chamberlain, widely regarded as the founding father of the Museum & Art Gallery, gave this painting to Birmingham's growing collection. At that time, Chamberlain was the Mayor of Birmingham and following his Liberal principles, was firmly committed to creating an institution for the inspiration and education of the people of the city.

Over the last year, the meanings of 'Prayers in the Desert' have been explored by the 21st century inhabitants of Birmingham, a city in which Chamberlain's Museum & Art Gallery still remains while the landscape and people around it have transformed. The reinterpretation of this painting began in the summer of 2015, when members of Birmingham's faith communities worked with us to plan, design and select objects for a new co-curated gallery. At an early stage in the gallery's development, this painting was selected by Mr Chishti, a committee member at the Central Mosque. Together we discussed its subject matter and developed a new interpretation that focuses on prayer as a central part of Muslim spiritual life, while also acknowledging the painting's important art historical context.

This reinterpretation is particularly poignant because it was the first 19th century British painting to accurately portray Islamic religious practice. Given the fantastically diverse and multicultural city that Birmingham has become, I hope that Joseph Chamberlain would approve of its new interpretation and home in the 'Faith in Birmingham' Gallery, where it is presented alongside a set of prayer beads and flanked by a case containing Christian crosses, Jewish candlesticks and a Sikh turban.

Dr Rebecca Bridgman

© The Helen Chadwick estate

Vanity

1986
Helen Chadwick (1953–1996)
Cibachrome photograph
Presented by the Friends of
Birmingham Museums, 1987

As a curator looking after historic paintings, one of the things that fascinates me about Helen Chadwick's work is its dialogue with the art of the past. In 1986, the year she made 'Vanity', she spent two months as artist-in-residence here at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, producing new work in response to an 18th-century painting by Johann Georg Platzer in Birmingham's collection. She remembered how she 'used to let my mind meander over it, as a child might stand captivated by the movement of an insect in a crevice.'

Chadwick's work often combines luscious beauty and repulsion; sensuality and death. It's not surprising that she was drawn to Vanitas paintings: still lifes that presented an abundance of exquisite objects, flowers and ripe fruit only to remind us of their inevitable slide into decay. In this work she references two art conventions: Vanitas pictures, and moralising paintings on the theme of Vanity itself, traditionally shown as a beautiful woman admiring her own reflection.

Here rounded shapes echo one another: golden spheres, the mirror's edge, the contours of Chadwick's own body. Her breast presses against its mirror image, a point of connection between the real and reflected worlds. 'Vanity' delights in its contrast of textures: the softness of draped fabrics, feathers and skin against the hard and shimmering surface of mirrored glass and gleaming metal. Like Vanitas paintings of the past, Chadwick's image glories in sensuous pleasures while accepting - even celebrating - their fragility and impermanence. The world, the body, even art itself: everything passes away.

Victoria Osborne

Helen Chadwick is not the first 20th-century female artist to represent herself naked from behind and employing a mirror to present her hidden face as an image within the image. The pose seems to originate in Velázquez's artwork 'The Rokeby Venus', where Cupid holds the mirror through which the viewer is allowed a once-removed, face-to-face encounter with the goddess. The presence of the face as a reflection seems to complete the picture in the sense of the reality of the vicarious encounter for the voyeur. He (or she) is given permission and access to the scene by the face. On the other hand, the face, appearing as it does at a distance from the body, seems to challenge the same remoteness enjoyed by the viewer/voyeur. We are caught looking by the returning gaze. Chadwick's 'Vanity' does not do that. Her gaze is enclosed on herself as she feigns an impossible rapture with her own image. There is no challenge to the gaze of the viewer even though she holds the mirror closely, like a shield, it does not protect her. It further exposes her and I suspect that is why she used the title. In this image, she is looking at the space behind self-presentation.

There is poignancy about this vantage point on the body, which is further heightened when it is used in self portraiture. From behind, the figure is prone, completely subject to the viewer's gaze. The back of one's body, which can only be seen by oneself through reflections, belongs bodily only to others - and privileged others at that. Velázquez's mirror reflection challenges this privileged mastery whilst Chadwick's submits passively to it. Strangely, by not returning the gaze and offering herself to the viewer unchallenged, she suggests a sacrifice. Even the way the image is wrapped up in the conventional or allegorical pretext for erotic images seems to make one feel complicit in some intrusion on private space.

John Stezaker

Telling Vanity

In 'Vanity', the mirror takes centre stage as a point of reflection for the artist and her artwork. In literature, there are many famous mirrors, many of them powerful. The mirror in the Snow White story is a truth-teller who reveals the stepmother's villainous vanity. In Ovid's 'Metamorphosis', the beautiful Narcissus is punished for his cruelty by falling in love with his own reflection and wasting away. The Mirror of Erised holds false promise for Harry Potter who must escape its illusory reflections. The reflection in the mirror of 'Vanity' shows us another story, echoed in Chadwick's earlier installation, 'The Oval Court'. Here vanity is an Eden-like search for knowledge, but a quest that is illusory, for vanity, as the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, is meaningless. Mirrors are, after all, illusory storytellers. They do not show us how we appear to others, only how we appear to ourselves. They reverse reality rather than represent it, similar to the way that cameras work by inverting images through their lenses. As a photograph, what we see in 'Vanity' is a representation of a reflection, not the reflection itself. There's another reflection here of our most modern of storytelling mirrors, the selfie. Selfies let us reproduce our own reflections and then display them as we tell stories about our lives on social media sites. Of course, these selfies, like Chadwick's mirror, are never simple or transparent, and so remind us to look beyond the surface, to the stories behind and beyond.

Dr Ruth Page

The who and the when

Who do you see in the mirror?

It is not a moment of revelation. The mirror does not allow a confrontation with the 'real' us — however stark the light and however long we stare. Refracted rather than reflected, we see a person through the prism of our culture. Faces and bodies are presented for inspection. Movies and magazines provide the standards they are judged against and refashioned towards. That is why 1930s cosmetics adverts often featured a woman at her dressing table.

Our reflection is never entirely our own.

When do you see in the mirror?

A passing moment carries the weight of its time and other times. A crease in the skin, greying hair — each marks the distance between our visible now and our vivid-remembered then. Histories folded together in a brief reflection.

A woman (or a man) gazes into a mirror: the image recurs in paintings and in photographs. Do not think of this as a timeless act, however. To look in a mirror is always of a time. The fabric of the everyday changes. Silvered glass, compact mirrors, cameras that turn on us — all of these mark cultures which are historically specific. Technology and materiality change how we can relate to ourselves.

How we think of selfhood is always particular to a time. Do you search for the revealing traces of psychology in the shape of your lips? Is the self-within discernible in your eyes? The post-Freudian mirror: a vehicle for anxious self-scrutiny and impossible self-knowledge.

Professor Matt Houlbrook

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