

PORTRAITS OF BARRY AND BURKE IN THE CHARACTERS OF ULYSSES AND HIS COMPANION FLEEING FROM THE CAVE OF POLYPHEMUS James Barry (1741-1806)

James Barry was a protégée of John Butts in Cork when the statesman, Edmund Burke, spotted his talent. Burke became the young artist's patron and helped him travel and study in London, Paris and Rome. He took his inspiration from the colours of Titian and the composition of late classical works that he had the opportunity to see in Rome. Barry believed he could combine the high ideals of history painting with contemporary issues to revive history painting for a new time. Despite the fact that history painting was out of fashion. His greatest work was a series of neo-classical paintings, *The Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture*, for the Royal Society of Arts in London. Barry was appointed Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy in 1779. His paintings were hailed, but he was expelled in 1799 because of his radical political views and his continuous disagreements with the Academy. He died in 1806 and was then honoured for his life's work by his old adversaries.



Portraits of Barry and Burke in the Guise of Ulysses and his Companions Escaping from the Cave of Polyphemus is a complex work. It shows in beautiful detail the classical tale of Ulysses, hidden under a sheep, escaping from the cave of the blinded Cyclops. While it is also a comment on the political situation that existed in England at the time; America was pushing for Independence while England was forcefully retaliating, both Barry and Burke were against the British response, but in this portrait Burke is cautioning the more outspoken Barry.

DISCUSSION

- This painting was painted in 1776, when there was a renewed interest in all things from ancient Greece and Rome. What in the painting looks particularly classical?
- Is the artist most interested in portraying himself and the statesman Edmund Burke or in telling this story of Ulysses? Why do you think this?
- The artist has created a great sense of depth in this painting, his strong colours are in the foreground and colours get paler as they recede, in what other ways has he created a sense of distance?
- Barry has taken great care to paint soft skin textures here, what other textures do you think he has captured well?
- Do you think that the colours used on the clothes of the two main characters could be symbolic? What could they mean?

- The artist is looking up at Burke, as Burke cautions him, what do you make of the expression on Barry's face?
- Knowing that both of these men opposed England's reaction to the American struggle for Independence and neither therefore were very popular at this time, what could this painting mean?

IN THE GALLERY

Find the painting *The Prince of Wales in the Guise of St George*. In this painting Barry has again used a mythological theme. What comment is he making on the character of the prince?

Look closely at the paintings, can you see any brush-marks? Is the paint thickly applied in the textured areas or are the textures created by colour alone?

What do you think of the scale of these paintings? Does it suit the subject matter?

Can you imagine these paintings being much bigger or smaller? Would they have the same effect?



HANDS ON

Brainstorm ideas for a drawing that has these elements of James Barry's painting:

- (1) It is based on a mythological story (think costume and setting)
- (2) It contains a portrait of you and someone well known (in politics or generally)
- (3) There is some comment on a current social or political issue.

Set up a still life with a variety of textures (wool, various fabrics, metal, bone etc...).

Sketch and paint the composition or take sections of it and concentrate on creating the textures.

Trace an area (or the whole composition) of the Ulysses painting and using magazines or mixed-media collage, re-create the image in your own way.