

Amazons, Imaging, and Imagining the Graeco-Roman Past

Michael Svetbird

My love of photographing artistic objects from the classical world was a gradual evolution in which my experiences and interests intersected and were enriched by my cultural background – of Armenian, Jewish, and Russian descent – to mature into my profession today. This all began when I came across the books of Robert Graves, especially *The Greek Myths* (1955), when I was seven or eight years of age, and became fascinated by the whole new (to me) fantastic universe of characters, creatures, heroes, events, locations, and motivations. When I was nine or ten my parents enrolled me into an evening class called Art School for Children, which I attended for four years. This involved regular visits to art and history museums where we were encouraged to sketch, which we did mostly in charcoal and pencil, and this, of course, also involved the study of art history. My initial interest in and knowledge of the classical world began to grow, naturally developing into a better understanding of the genesis, origin, and story of artefacts and historical characters in aesthetic and cultural terms. This formed the basis for further study and, by the time I applied for university, I had read everything I could on ancient art, its mythology, and classical history more generally.



Kylix depicting a Scythian archer or Amazon, Classical period, c. 480 BC, Attic, red-figure pottery. Diameter: 38cm. The Glyptothek, Munich, SH 2644. Photo: 2020. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



Kylix of Achilles and Penthesilea by the Penthesilea Painter, Classical period, c. 470–460 BC, from Vulci, Attic, red-figure pottery. Diameter: 43cm. The Glyptothek, Munich, inv. SH 2688. Photo: 2020. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



Left, hydria depicting three Amazons preparing for battle: Antiopeia, Hypsipyle, and Andromache (left to right), by the Hysis Painter of the 'Pioneer Group', Classical period, c. 510–500 BC, Attica/Athens, red-figure pottery. Height: 50.8cm. The Glyptothek, Munich, inv. SH 2423. Photo: 2020. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird

I studied and trained as an architect with a specialism in design. There was a natural crossover with Greek and Roman architecture, and I longed to take part in archaeological field trips and excavations. I then worked in a private local property business which developed into development and investment consulting. While this was interesting from the perspective of attending some exciting events, projects, and meetings (sometimes with world-famous architects) I regret that I missed the opportunity to become an archaeologist or art historian. On the other hand, my past business activities gave me the opportunity to travel and visit wonderful archaeological sites, art galleries, and museums. During this time I travelled extensively, especially in the United States, from the end of the 1990s before moving to London fifteen years ago and becoming naturalised seven years later; I currently work in Milan. While ‘globe-trotting’ I never missed the opportunity to visit an archaeological or art-historical museum.

My career became concentrated on design, visualisation, and photography-related software, and, ever since I can remember, I always had a camera with me. I suppose that in the early years this was more like a hobby but latterly it metamorphosed into professional artistic

Amazon in Greek Armour, 2018 (produced on a plane journey from London to New York), mixed-media: pencil, pen, drawing tablet, Photoshop.

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photography. In the past few years I have divided my time between London and Italy, with frequent travels to Greece and occasional visits to Germany and elsewhere. This gave me a chance to explore archaeological sites and museums and concentrate, in particular, on museum photography, and there are no shortage of favourite museums in the United Kingdom (the British Museum, of course), Italy (the Capitoline Museums, Vatican Museums, and a host of other institutions), Greece (the Acropolis Museum, the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, and many others), Germany (the Altes and Pergamon Museums, ‘Museum Island’, Berlin, the Glyptothek in Munich), and elsewhere in Europe (the Louvre and other institutions), Russia (the State Hermitage in St Petersburg, of course), and the US (the Metropolitan Museum of Art and others). As a self-proclaimed museologist and self-educated ‘virtual archaeologist’ I read and saw everything I could relating to ancient world history, classical antiquity and its mythology. My days of boring property development were over!

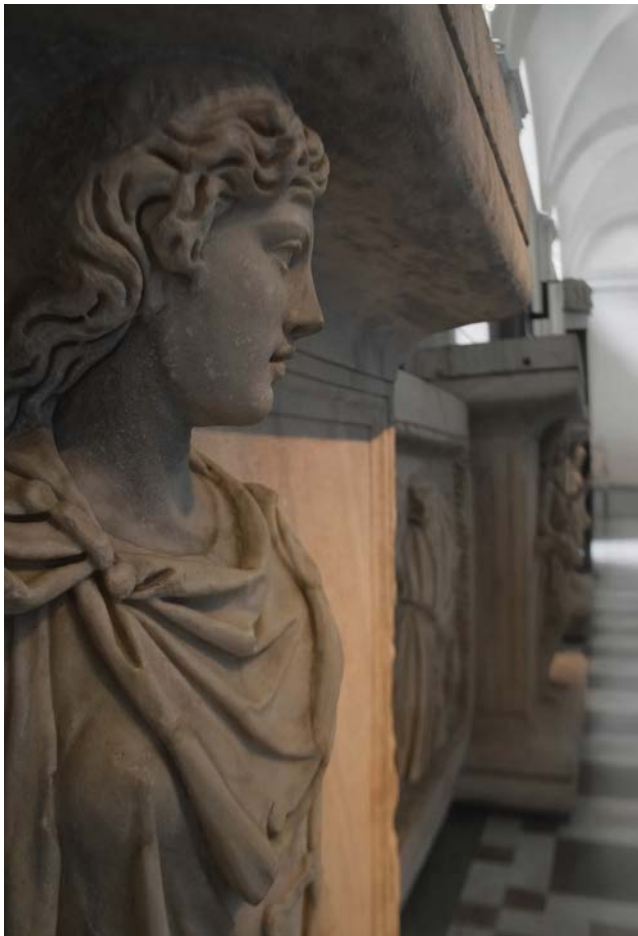
I find classical mythology and ancient history in general, and characters in particular, exciting in their



Hippolyta’s Magic Girdle, 2018, modified in 2021, mixed media: pencil, ink, pen, drawing tablet, Photoshop. Michael Svetbird © msp
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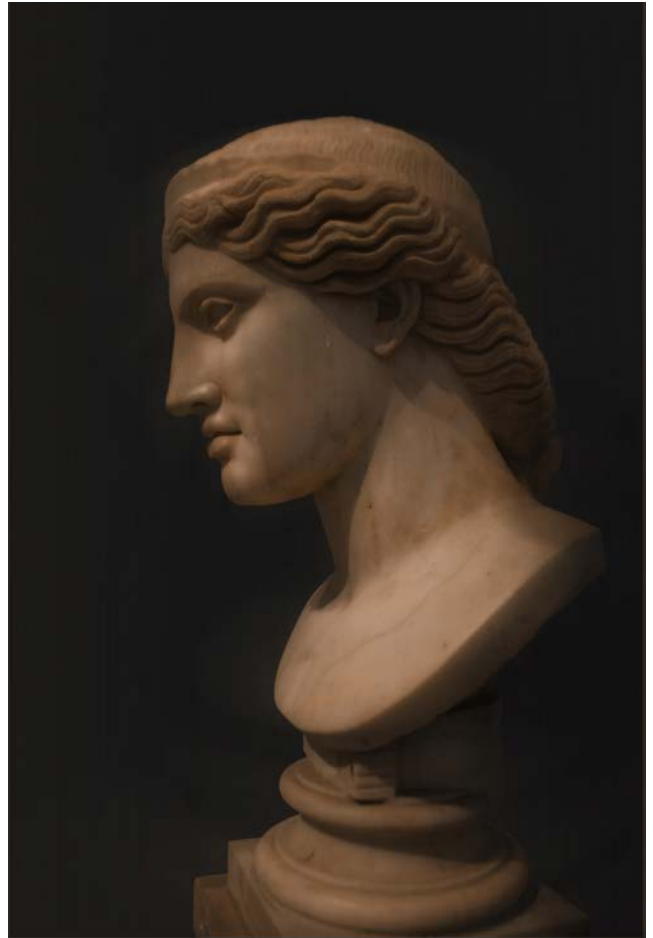
diversity, controversy, ambiguity, ‘wildness’ of actions and motivations (often with no happy ending, sometimes horrible and immoral, with no rationality, and so on), somehow transformed, in art, to artistically and aesthetically mesmerising images (especially in sculpture and vase-painting). These characters were refined and aestheticised by ancient sculptors and painters (many of the works had a purely utilitarian or decorative function and the more expensive artefacts were, of course, commissioned), but, however this may have arisen, it becomes even more curious and interesting when the stories of these characters are applied to their imagery.

One of my favourite subjects are Amazons (also known as Oiorpata). In reality they didn’t look like



Parthia or Armenia in close-up profile, ‘you look at me and I look back at you’. Detail of the ‘Hadrianeum Reliefs’ depicting personifications of the provinces of the Roman Empire, and trophies; part of the decorative programme of the complex known as the Hadrianeum, Rome, the temple dedicated in the Campus Martius to the deified Hadrian by Antoninus Pius, Rome, AD 145. Life-size marble statue/relief, one of the three exhibited life-size female figures representing Roman provinces. Naples National Archaeological Museum. Photo: 2019. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird

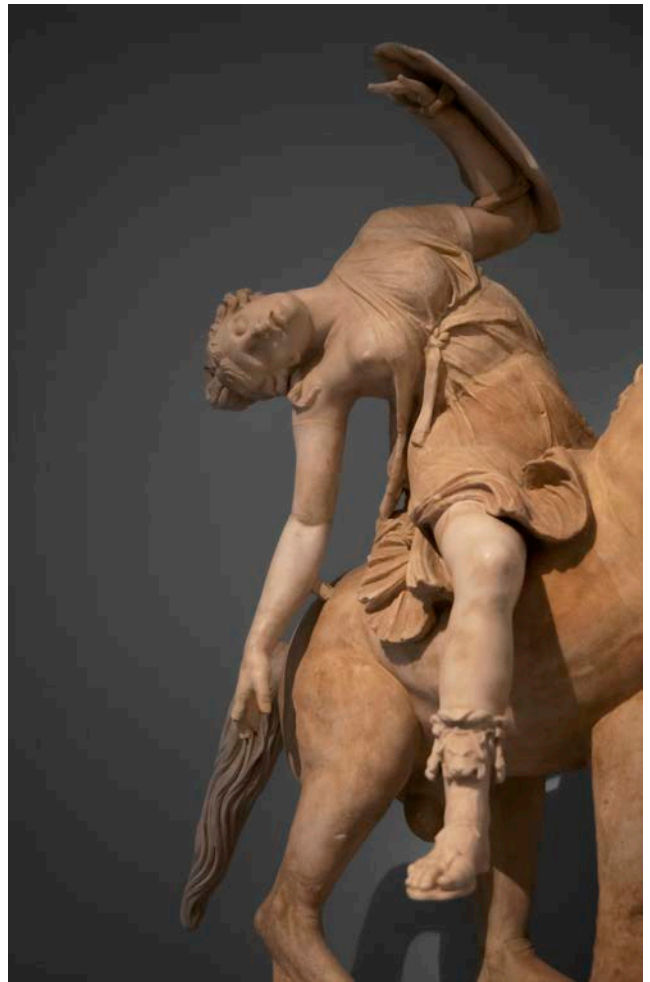
Head of Artemis (Ariccia Type), late-Hadrianic copy, 130–138, of a Greek original of the second half of the fifth century BC, marble. Height: 32cm (approximately). Naples National Archaeological Museum, inv. NM 6005. Photo: 2018. Edited for ‘HEADS.Sculpture’ MSP online gallery in 2020. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



their representations by ancient sculptors (images on pottery are perhaps more accurate), devoid of elegant sandals or fine *exomis/chiton* style of dress; in reality they were nomads who experienced a tough lifestyle and wore robust boots and trousers, caps or hats, and leather jackets. This is attested by an archaeological expedition in southern Russia led in late 2019 by Valerii Guliaev with the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Scientists. They unearthed a 2,500-year-old tomb which contained the remains of four women warriors from the nomadic Scythian tribe which are believed to be the real-life inspiration for the Amazons of ancient mythology. Yet we see exciting interpretations of them in art and I often think of how this transformation happened, especially assuming that vase painters and sculptors had only heard about Amazons from storytellers and, possibly, travellers from other regions without experiencing them in person.



Fallen Amazon, detail, part of the 'Small Pergamene Votive Offering' display (with statues of a Giant, Dead Warrior, Wounded Gaul, Amazon). Roman, second century AD, copy of a Hellenistic original of the second century BC, marble. Slightly smaller than life-size. Naples National Archaeological Museum, inv. NM 6012. Photo: 2020. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird

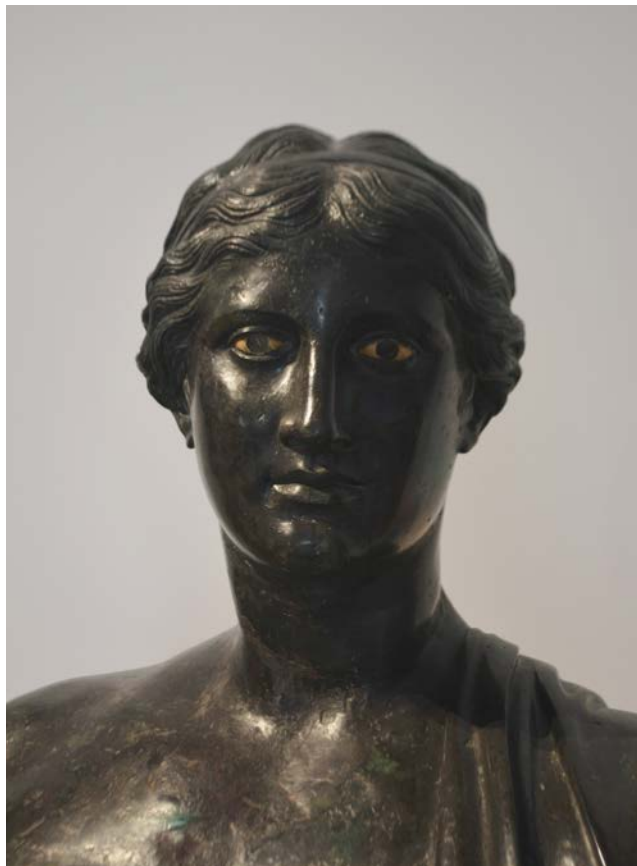


Amazon on horseback, detail. Roman, second century AD, copy of a Hellenistic original of the second century BC, marble. Height: 2m (approximately). Naples National Archaeological Museum, inv. NM 6407. Photo: 2020. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird

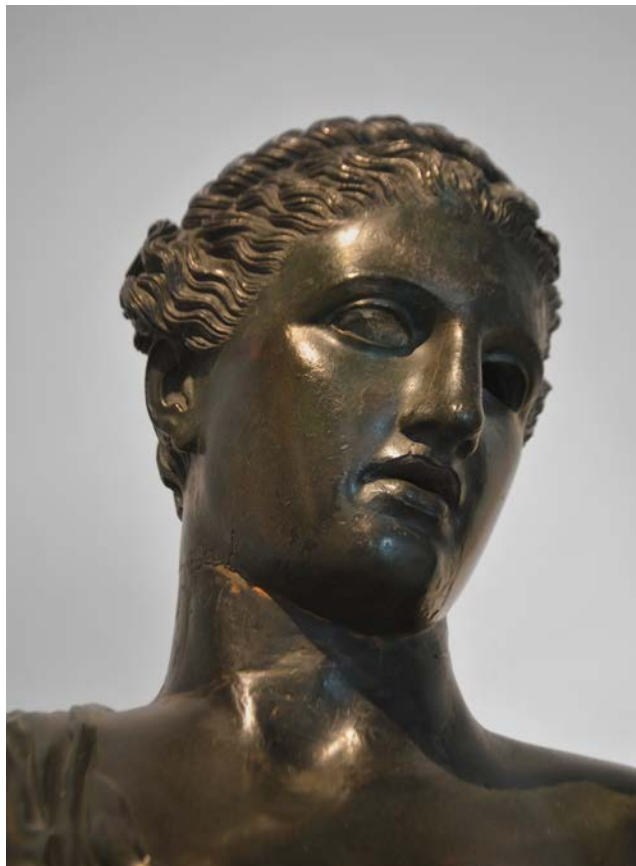


Polykleitos' 'Lansdowne-type', Sciarra Amazon, replica, marble, one of the copies from Pushkin Museum of Arts, Moscow. The model is Beatrice Barducci. The initial idea was to produce a sequence of 're-enactment' images based on my photos from different museums, the project was interrupted due to the Covid quarantine, and perhaps will be resumed Photos: 2018 (left), 2019 (right), Edited 2019–2020. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird

Bust of Sappho from the Villa of the Papyri, Herculaneum, first century BC, Roman, copy of a Hellenistic original of the second century BC, bronze. Life-size. Naples National Archaeological Museum, inv. NM 4896. Photo: 2018. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



Bust of Berenice or Artemis From the Villa Pisoni at Herculaneum, first century BC, Roman, copy of a Hellenistic original of the second century BC, bronze. Life-size. Naples National Archaeological Museum, inv. NM 5592. Photo: 2018. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



Philosophically and socially, matriarchy is an interesting concept to examine, especially in terms of the manner in which it resonates in the modern era with feminism, gender, and social equality. There is, however, a lack of archaeological and historically accurate data, which amounts to a ‘myths versus facts’ situation, but this mystery and controversy pushes one to think, imagine, and explore. When I look at an object – whether a sculpture, a decorative detail, or a vase – I like to contemplate the stories and myths behind it – its creator’s thoughts and perspectives. Such contemplations may be found in particular details, such as the ‘tamga’ brands on painted horses or the details of armour in sculpture. This is why I prefer close-ups and often prefer to devote more attention to a particular detail rather than an entire object. One of my favourite projects is ‘Portraits of Amazons’, which consists of a number of shots of this subject taken circumstantially on a phone camera.

Unlike many other photographers that try to blur, smooth, and ‘clean’ objects, especially marbles, to give them a smooth texture, I like to emphasise the ‘time-scars’ of an object – its defects, chips, scratches, and so on. I think this

is where my inner-amateur-archaeologist self-influences the museum photographer in me. I love these time-traces and prefer to highlight rather than disguise such traits.

I especially like rough textures and backgrounds, imperfections, cracks, and so on, and also appreciate other photographic work produced in this way. In many cases, though, objects photographed with ‘ cliché ’ grey backgrounds with gradient and/or in light-boxes really lose their character, and, in my opinion, look somewhat banal and ripped out of context. I think such photographs are good for museum archives, databases, and catalogues, but less so if you want to focus on character, create some ambience around an object, or present it artistically within its natural ‘environment’.

If I have a chance to fully orchestrate a photo-shoot for a museum for its artistic, merchandise, or social media production (not for a catalogue), I would design something unusual with different lighting, play with backdrops (draping, textures), use other objects with contradicting dimensions, colour, and texture, and focus on details and unusual angles.



Above: Head of Athena, detail, first century AD, Roman, copy of a Hellenistic sculpture, marble.

Over life-size.

Venice National Archaeological Museum, inv. 264/B. Photo: 2021.
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Left: bust of Athena, Roman imperial copy of a Classical bronze original of the second half of the fifth century BC, attributed to Kresilas, from the Giovanni Grimani collection, 1587, Marble. Height: 1.72m.

Venice National Archaeological Museum, inv. 227.
Photo: 2021.

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Below left: head of an Amazon (Mattei type), from Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, a fragment of a group of Roman copies modelled on those of the Athenian sculptor Phidias of the fifth century BC, Hadrianic Period, 117–138, Parian marble.

Life-size.

Palazzo Massimo, the National Roman Museum, Rome, inv. 124000. Photo: 2018.

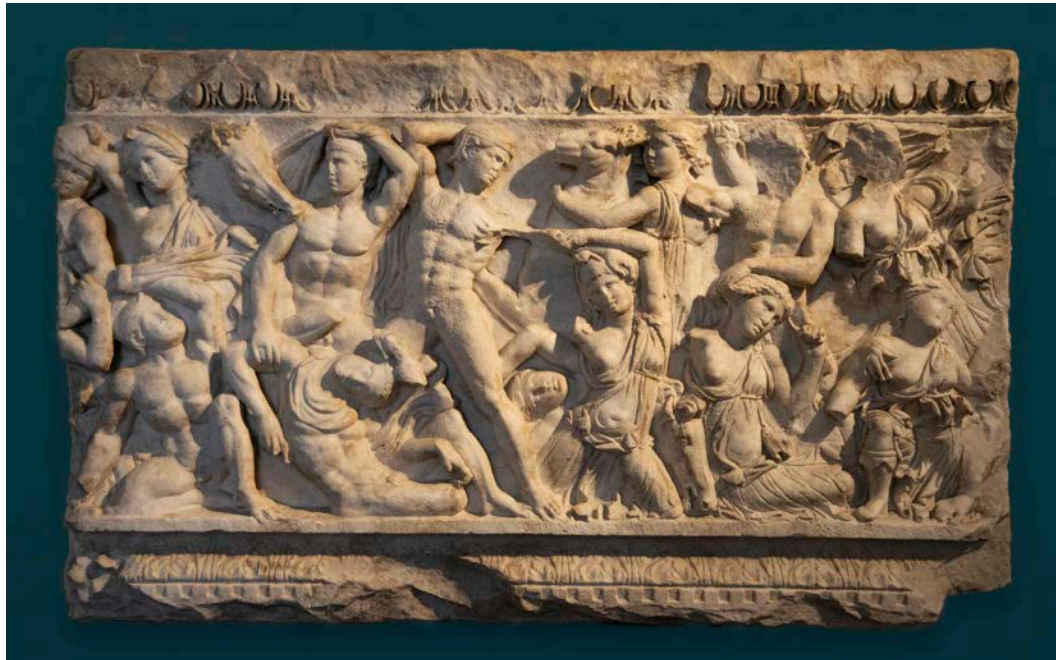
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Below: the Ludovisi Fury from the Ludovisi Collection, second century AD, Roman copy of a Hellenistic sculpture of the second century BC. Carrara marble.

Life-size. Photo: 2018.

Palazzo Massimo, the National Roman Museum, Rome, inv. 8650.
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Front sarcophagus panel depicting the Battle of the Amazons, the product of a specialist workshop active in Attica, from 'the floor of the church of San Salvatore, Brescia, found in 1998, second-third century AD, Roman, Proconnesian or Italian Himettius marble. Height: 2.3m; length: 1.27m. Archaeological Museum of Santa Giulia, Brescia, inv. MR 10710. Photo: 2020. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird

There are problems with live-shooting in museums as a visitor, especially with glass reflections and poor light, mostly with pottery placed in glass cabinets. Sometimes curators have strange ideas about how to light objects or how to position them, which give visitors problems with reflected light or face depicted characters on vases towards a wall. For this reason when I visit a museum I always put on a black or dark-coloured sweatshirt and take a cardboard file-holder to block pin-lighting (narrow beams of light). I love Italian museums as well because they are

very 'user-friendly' and nobody bothers if you try to squeeze in the gap between a box and a wall to take a snap of the hidden 'Side B'. In Greece this may result in some unfriendly discussions with staff, and some of them, perhaps understandably, get nervous watching you manoeuvring around an object for more than fifteen or twenty minutes. I like both monochrome (black-and-white) and colour photography and have no strong preference for one or the other; really it all depends on what you shoot and what impression you want to convey. One of the most common questions



Front sarcophagus panel of an Amazomachy, found in the Via Collatina, Rome, in 1744, regarded by the German art historian and archaeologist Johann Winckelmann as one of the finest sarcophagi of its period; it was donated to the Capitoline Museums by Pope Benedict XIV, Roman, 140–150, white marble. Height: 1.65m; Length: 2.4m. The Capitoline Museums, Rome, inv. S 726. Photo: 2018. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird

Front sarcophagus panel of an Amazonomachy, detail of the sculpture on page 29, Roman, 140–150, white marble. The Capitoline Museums, Rome, inv. S 726. Photo: 2018. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



I get asked – as do photographers more generally – is: do I use Photoshop? Yes, I use it, and have done so since its release in the 1990s, but never for ‘improving’ or altering the appearance of objects – never to make them look better than they really are. I do some colour and contrast correction, kill reflections, noise, and small irrelevant details (like corners of museum tags and the noses of wondering visitors). I sometimes work on backgrounds and shadows, and on colour schemes on occasions, as long as it doesn’t affect the natural textures and colours of an artefact, or if museum lighting distorts them, to create an atmosphere and impression that I would like to convey – photography is an artistic pursuit, after all.

Michael Svetbird is a British artistic photographer currently based in Milan (www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird).



Metope fragment of an Amazonomachy showing a battle scene between a Greek warrior and an Amazon, from Taranto, 3 BC, soft stone, metope fragment. Height: 38cm; width: 40cm. National Archaeological Museum of Taranto, inv. 37355. Photo: 2020. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird



Wounded Amazon (Sciarra or Landsdown type), found on the Quirinal Hill in Rome and acquired in 1869, modelled on an original sculpture of the Classical period, c. 430 BC by Polykleitos, Roman, imperial period, marble. The Altes Museum, Berlin, inv. SK 7. Photo: 2018. Michael Svetbird © msp www.instagram.com/michael_svetbird