

# Baldric, Byzantium and beyond

## The New Medieval and Renaissance Galleries

The Victoria and Albert Museum

MICHAEL PARASKOS

There is a subtle joke placed at the entrance to the V&A's new Mediaeval and Renaissance Galleries. As you enter through the sculpture court you are greeted by Giambologna's larger than life sculpture Samson Slaying the Philistine. It is a great work, but it is hard not to think it is also a pointed comment on the attitude of some people in the art and museum world to the idea of devoting a large proportion of a major museum to such an arcane subject as mediaeval and renaissance art. It was particularly brave of the V&A given the inevitable bias towards religious art in that period. But the V&A has always been an extraordinary centre for academic research as well as a stunning museum, and the joy of the new galleries is that they successfully bring these two facets of the museum together.

The new display has



'Samson Slaying a Philistine' by Giovanni Bologna

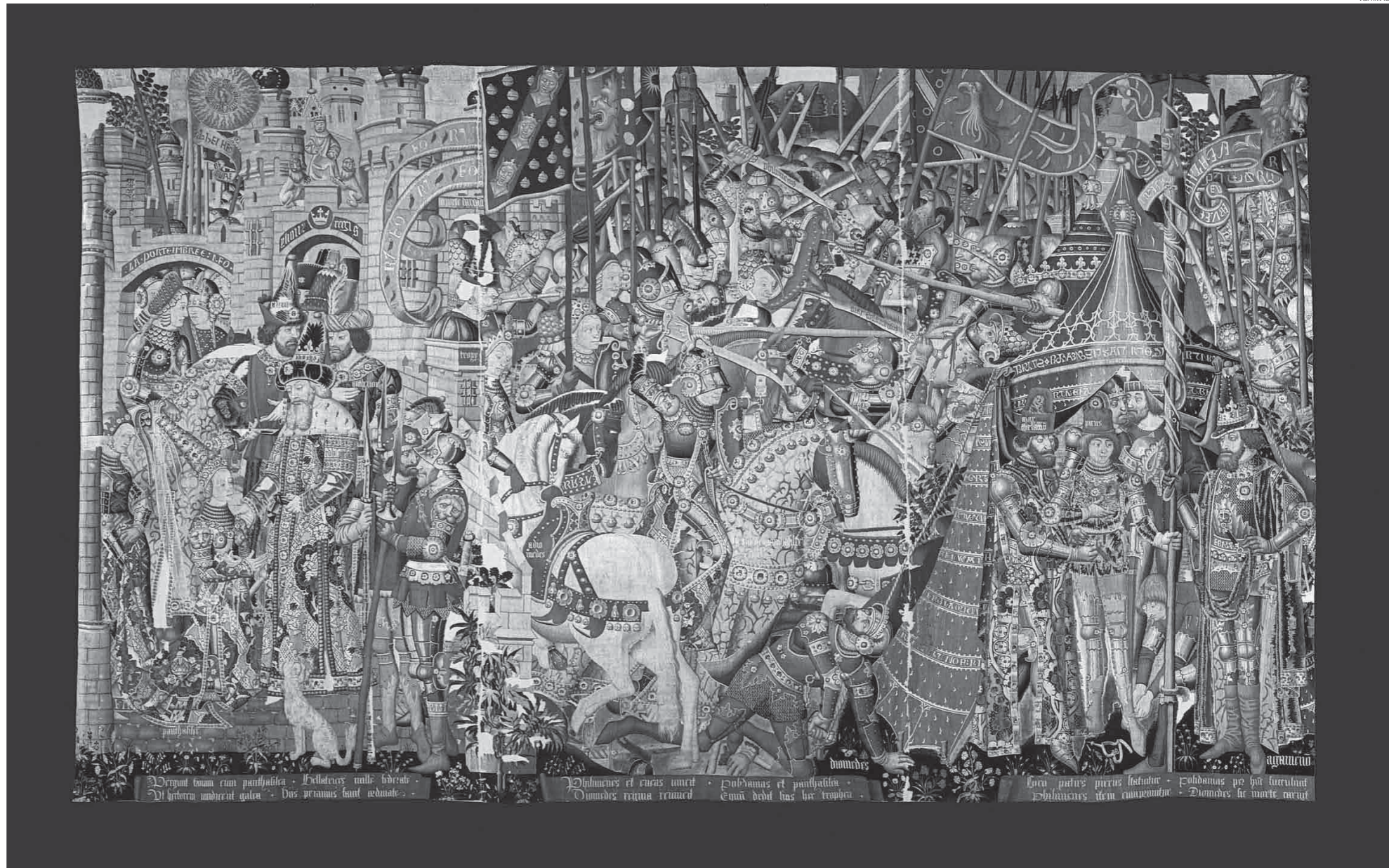
ishing, and presents familiar and unfamiliar works of art in ways that give them new life while respecting both the objects and the audience.

For the most part the display is chronological, running from Byzantine



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and Romanesque work through to the 1600s. It is ranged over three floors of a new wing created from an area that used to house the nineteenth-century galleries and stores, and the old sculpture court. Included are whole chunks of architecture taken from European renaissance churches to intricately carved boxwood rosary beads, but along the way there are plenty of gold and silver treasures, ivory statuettes and stunning stained glass, as well as mosaics, ceramics, paintings and fabrics. Indeed, the fabrics are possibly the greatest revelation of the new display as the curators



TAPESTRY: 'The War of Troy', southern Netherlands (now Belgium, Tournai), 1475-1490

seem to have found a – way of showing ancient textiles without placing them in dreary darkened rooms.

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but this is not a criticism of the display. To the modern eye the mediaeval world is disorientating, but that is also what makes it so seductive. It is like discovering a new planet at a timely moment in our history when

so much of our present day world is becoming uniform and bland. On this new planet many of the objects are extraordinarily rare and beautiful, but some go beyond such descriptions. The V&A is home to what

is believed to be the only surviving Byzantine sculpture of the Virgin Mary, the rest having been destroyed by religious fanatics in the eighth century.

But even to single out this piece is to do a disservice

to the hundreds of other objects on display, almost all of which deserve time and attention. There is just so much to see that the display is designed to overwhelm and encourage repeat visits, rather than offering an

instant bluffer's guide to the land of Baldric. It really is a remarkable achievement.

## Sweet melancholy

### THE ANTIDOTE – CLASSIC POETRY FOR MODERN LIFE

An extract from 'The Nightingale' by Coleridge

CHRISTOPHER NIELD

#### The Nightingale

No cloud, no relic of the sunken day  
Distinguishes the West, no long thin slip  
Of sullen light, no obscure trembling hues.  
Come, we will rest on this old mossy bridge!  
You see the glimmer of the stream beneath,  
But hear no murmuring: it flows silently  
O'er its soft bed of verdure. All is still.  
A balmy night! and though the stars be dim,  
Yet let us think upon the vernal showers  
That gladden the green earth, and we shall find  
A pleasure in the dimness of the stars.  
And hark! the Nightingale begins its song,  
"Most musical, most melancholy" bird!  
A melancholy bird? Oh! idle thought!  
In Nature there is nothing melancholy.

The Taoist yin yang symbol expresses the belief that every apparent duality can be balanced and reconciled: light and dark, male and female, heat and cold. This poem by Coleridge expresses a similar conviction. From darkness comes light; from decay comes serenity, and from silence comes pouring forth the song of nature.

Coleridge opens the poem with a number of striking negations. Just count the "no's! The sonorous "o" sound tolls like a bell, creating a sombre atmosphere. There is no cloud, no relic of the sunken day, no hues... Even as the thought of light is planted in our heads, it is snatched away. The "trembling" throes of evening are extinguished and we find ourselves in the dark.

Are we afraid? We are in the hands of Coleridge, after all, master of the supernatural and author of the blood-curdling *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. At this point, we may think the poem should be called *The Nightmare* not *The Nightingale*.

As if to reassure us, he invites us to "rest" with him on an "old mossy bridge". Autobiographically, he addresses his friend and rival Wordsworth and the poet's sister Dorothy, whom he walked and talked with each day in the Lake District, swapping poems and sharing dreams of democratic utopia – but the imaginative

world of the poem transcends time. In form, it is a "conversation poem", marrying the formality of blank verse and the rhythms of daily speech, and it brings us into their conversation even today.

Somehow the image of the "mossy bridge" is instinctively comforting. We sense the slow processes of nature that take place out of the corner of our eye, providing a radically different perspective to the jut and fret of our busy lives – granting us an acceptance of impermanence. Symbolically, the bridge also represents the threshold, beyond which – who knows?

Coleridge directs our attention to the stream below, the sole "glimmer". As well as taking the light away, he strips away all sound. The lines build to the stark summation: "All is still".

We have reached the moment where the distractions of the day are left behind and we can breathe the calm.

Then "the nightingale begins its song." In the pitch black, its voice seems to arise from within us as

much as the trees around. It is pure inspiration, the presence of the muse. From negation comes a song of absolute, care-free affirmation.

Coleridge's first thought is a fragment of poetry: "Most musical, most melancholy bird". This beautifully alliterative line is taken from Milton's *Il Penseroso* – a study of the spirit of sorrow. With charming irreverence, Coleridge dismisses this as "an idle thought". This is a wonderful example of how poetry helps to train our perceptions, and develop our character, even when we passionately disagree with it.

In a way, the poem is a protest against the falsity of literary convention. Coleridge asks us to attend to what we really see,

hear and feel. In another work, the "dimness of the stars" might symbolise the loss of faith, for instance, but Coleridge will have none of it. There is "pleasure" in this sight too. Enough of doom and gloom!

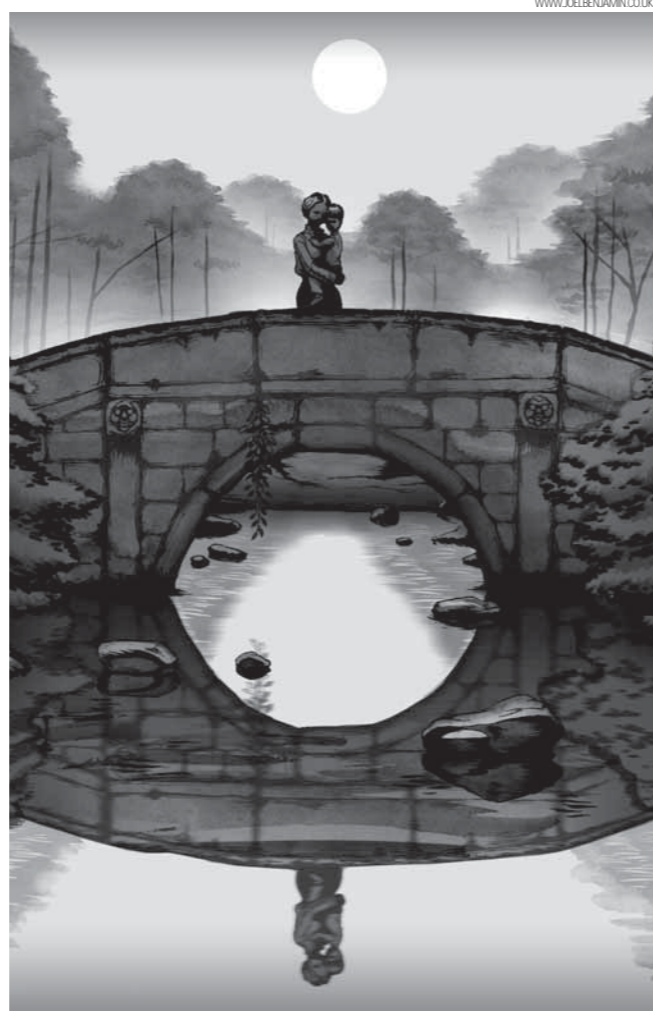
Coleridge states his naive Romantic creed: "In Nature there is nothing melancholy". The Romantics, rejecting the cold eye of the Enlightenment and what they saw as the destruction of the industrial revolution, turned to nature for renewal. Of them all, Coleridge was perhaps the most ambivalent – and knowing this, and the path of his tormented life, his bright assertion carries a touch of pathos.

The poem, which continues for another one hundred lines, goes on to describe a mysterious woman gliding by the landscape's "pathways" and Coleridge's son laughing at the moon – before returning to the nightingale at the very end.

No matter how many times we say the words, there is something intensely refreshing about this "balmy" night-time scene, with its mossy bridge and silent flowing river – and of course the silvery sweet song in the darkness, telling us that there is always joy to be found, even in its opposite.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) was an English poet, critic and philosopher.

Christopher Nield is a poet living in London.



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