

IKON

Ikon Gallery, 1 Oozells Square, Brindleyplace, Birmingham
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tel. +44 (0) 121 248 0708 / fax. +44 (0) 121 248 0709
website. www.ikon-gallery.co.uk
Ikon Gallery is a registered charity no. 528892

John Flaxman

Line to Contour

13 February – 21 April 2013

John Flaxman (1755 – 1826) was a leading exponent of British Neoclassicism, renowned during his lifetime for a spare draughtmanship in illustrations of stories from ancient Greece. This exhibition, curated by art historian David Bindman, will consist almost entirely of drawings and plaster models for sculpture from UCL Art Museum at University College London. Much of the work, including sketches from everyday life, is rarely seen and gives us an extraordinary insight into the thinking that led to the artist's more formal output.

Born in York, England, in 1755, Flaxman learnt the techniques of sculpting in his father's plaster-cast workshop, beginning his own career as a designer for Josiah Wedgwood's world-famous pottery. Two medals by him were manufactured at the Soho mint in Birmingham during this time, which also saw the unveiling of his monument to influential industrialist Matthew Boulton in Handsworth Church. His impact on British manufacture continued for some decades, with many of his outline designs from the 1770s and 1780s continuing to be used throughout the Victorian period.

In 1787, Flaxman travelled to Rome for what would be the most creative period of his life. Staying for seven years, it was here that he produced his most famous works, engravings for publications of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and *The Tragedies of Aeschylus*. Instantly successful, the illustrations were universally acknowledged to have captured the very essence of Homeric Greece and medieval Italy. *Line to Contour* includes preliminary drawings for these works, alongside later illustrations modelled on Roman street scenes. Outline studies of male figures in cloaks and the famous sketch of a woman shaking a cloth out of a window are distinctive in their stylistic purity, reduced to a few essential lines.

On returning to London, Flaxman continued his practice in sculpture, finding numerous commissions for major public monuments as well as smaller funerary monuments produced in large numbers for churches throughout Great Britain and the Empire, including St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. His workshop was extensive, with Flaxman often confining himself to drawings and plaster models, leaving others to create the final marbles. These later works commemorate the dead with affecting simplicity, using a limited number of styles with only subtle changes applied. Plaster figures, representing the first or second stage of creation, sometimes preceded by sketches, feature in the exhibition, intended to be scaled up and carved into marble. They epitomise an emotional dimension in Flaxman's work which is, paradoxically, heightened through aesthetic restraint.

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Line to Contour is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue written by David Bindman, including an essay on the main themes of the exhibition, outline of the history of the Flaxman collections at University College London and previously unpublished photographs of sculptures in their setting before their destruction during the Second World War.

Line to Contour is a collaboration between Ikon and University College London.

Ends.

Note to Editors:

1. Private View on Wednesday 13 February, 1-8pm
2. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 6pm. Admission is free.
3. Ikon Gallery is supported using public funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council. Ikon Gallery Limited trading as Ikon, registered charity no. 528892.
4. For more information, high-res images and to arrange an interview with the curator please contact Helen Stallard on 0774 033 9604 or email h.stallard@ikon-gallery.co.uk

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Sample Images

All courtesy UCL Art Museum, University College London

