

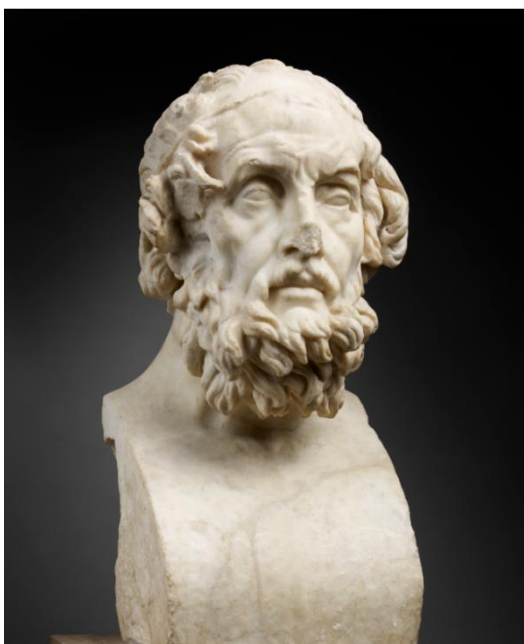


Press release – 29 January 2019

Temporary exhibition

# HOMER

27 March – 22 July 2019



Portrait imaginaire du poète Homère, 2<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C., d'après un original grec créé vers 150 avant J.-C., Paris, musée du Louvre  
© Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN-GP / Thierry Ollivier

The Musée du Louvre-Lens is organising one of the most ambitious exhibitions ever devoted to Homer, the “prince of poets”, author of two celebrated epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, that have been an integral part of Western societies since antiquity. It will explore the origins of Homer’s fascinating influence on Western artists and culture down the centuries, and shed light on its many mysteries.

Achilles, Hector, Ulysses: these names continue to resonate in people’s minds today. From antiquity to the Renaissance, artists borrowed from Homer’s stories a multitude of fundamental subjects that have shaped the history of art. What is the reason for this uninterrupted success?

This exhibition of international scope sets out to explore how artists drew on Homer and the heroes of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. It also provides an opportunity to examine numerous questions: Did Homer exist? Was he the sole author of these monumental works? Where and when did he live?

“Homeromania” has led the **Homeric poems** to be used **repeatedly as sources of inspiration**. The exhibition will explore the various aspects of this phenomenon and analyse its diverse manifestations in language, literature, the sciences, the arts, morality and life.

Through almost 250 works, dating from antiquity to the present day, the exhibition offers an unprecedented immersion in the riches of the Homeric world. It presents a selection of works as dense and varied as Homer’s influence, ranging from **paintings and objects from ancient Greece, sculptures and casts, and tapestries to paintings by Rubens, Antoine Watteau, Gustave Moreau, André Derain, Marc Chagall and Cy Twombly.**

## An exploration of the world of Homer

After a prelude devoted to the gods of Olympus, visitors begin their visit by discovering the “prince of poets” and above all the mysteries that surround him. They then begin their visit in the company of the principal heroes of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*: archaeological objects and modern works evoke the way in which these seminal sagas, reconsidered, reinterpreted and updated so many times, have been captured in images over time.

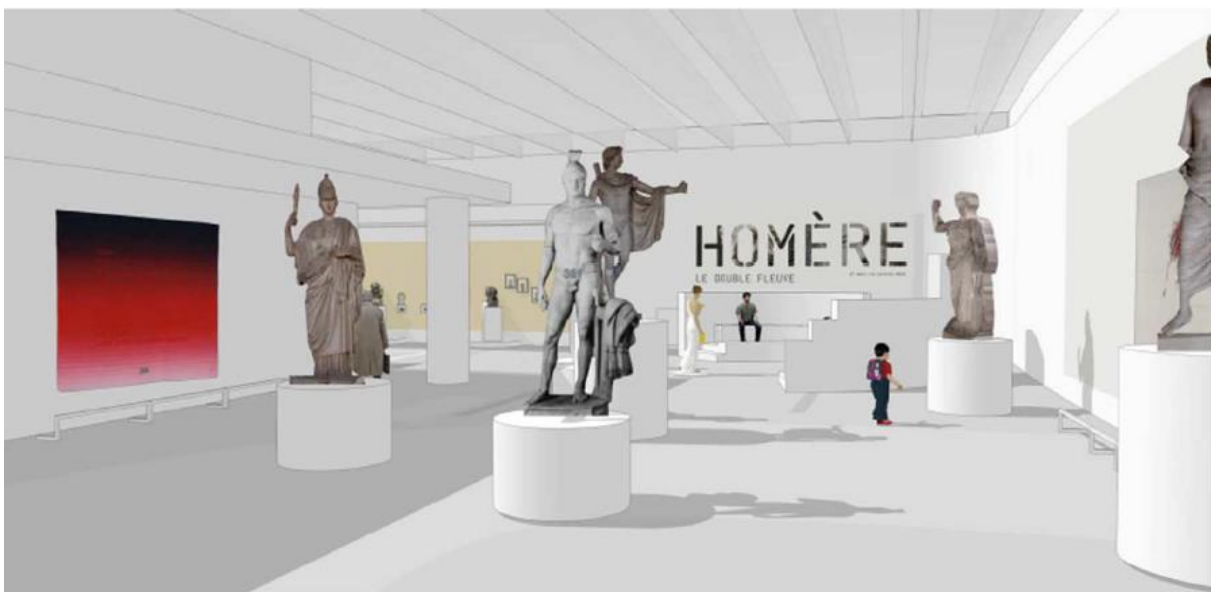
The exhibition includes a detour by way of other poems from the Epic Cycle that were lost over the course of time and which contained narratives recounting the most famous scenes of the Trojan War, including the Trojan horse, the death of Achilles and the abduction of Helen. These episodes reveal the full extent of the ancient epic literature and the miraculous nature of the conservation of Homer’s work.

The adventure ends with an exploration of the phenomena of “Homeromania” that has marked the science of archaeology and inspired works and behaviour, based on the extensive imitation of Homer that even extended to everyday life.



La muse Polymnie (Rome (origine)) © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski

*Curators: Alain Jaubert, writer and filmmaker, Alexandre Farnoux, director of the École Française d’Athènes, Vincent Pomarède, assistant general administrator of the Louvre, Luc Piralla, assistant director of the Musée du Louvre-Lens, assisted by Alexandre Estaquet-Legrand.*



Exhibition entrance: visitors are greeted by an assemblage of the gods of Olympus © Martin Michel

## EXHIBITION LAYOUT

### Who was Homer?



Cy Twombly - *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus* 1962  
Matériaux : huile sur toile, Mine de plomb © Cy Twombly  
Foundation. Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Philippe Migeat

The entrance to the exhibition sets the tone: **the assembled gods of Olympus and the Muse** greet visitors and create a dialogue with two contemporary works inspired by the “prince of poets”, including the painting by **Cy Twombly (left)**.

The beginning of the exhibition has a specific objective, namely to free visitors from any certainties they may have developed about Homer and to enable them to see the richness of everything they did not know. Portraits of the poet, dating from antiquity to the present day, testify by their number and variety to the questions – never resolved – surrounding his life, and reflect the **endlessly renewed desire to establish his features**. Blind, bearded, wandering or seated, holding a staff or scroll in his hand, Homer has inspired artists from all periods to create very different portraits. Several biographies were written about him in antiquity and a vast amount of research has been done since the Renaissance. But the question of his existence remains unresolved.

### From recited story, to written story

*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were initially oral works. The practice of making copies and of recitation meant that it was a while before the poems were given a definitive form. Scholars at the library in Alexandria established a scholarly edition of the two texts that distinguished the Homeric verses from subsequent additions, without however eliminating them. Indeed, there was a saying on this subject: it is easier to steal Zeus’s thunderbolt or Hercules’s club than a single line from Homer’s works. The same scholars divided the text into books. The exhibition also looks at the work of **Milman Parry** who, in the 1930s, reasserted the importance of the oral transmission of epic poems by investigating storytellers in the Balkans capable of reciting from memory poems with several thousand verses.



« Muse debout tenant un volumen » ; Myrina (site) signé Athénodoros © Photo RMN - Herve Lewandowski

The exhibition will confront visitors with another aspect of Homer's work that archaeology has clearly revealed today: **the anachronistic character of the heroes' world**. For a long time it was thought that the world celebrated by Homer in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* was a historical, datable one that was reflected in the poet's verse. But close analysis of the heroes' material world has revealed its heterogeneous nature, which is reflected in archaeological anachronisms. A display case contains a series of objects dating from the 16th century BC to the 8th century BC and which correspond to references made in the poems. They cannot have been archaeologically contemporary. The anachronisms in the poems are revealed by the sedimentation of elements from several periods linked to the poetic material's oral transmission, which was endlessly adapted.

### *The Iliad, a year in the midst of the Trojan War*

*"Wrath—sing goddess, of the ruinous wrath of Peleus' son Achilles, that inflicted woes without number upon the Achaeans, hurled forth to Hades many strong souls of warriors . . ."*

***The Iliad***, consisting of sixteen thousand verses divided among twenty-four books, concerns just one year of the Trojan War, which lasted ten years. **The story is focused entirely on the anger of Achilles, the most illustrious of Greek warriors.** A veritable chronicle of war, dotted with numerous details and interspersed with scenes of debate, *The Iliad* has been a constant source of inspiration for artists from antiquity to the present day. Although the text abounds in precise descriptions, this has not prevented artists from giving free rein to their creative imaginations by interpreting the Homeric account according to their own personalities and sensibilities.



*The Quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon*, GAULLI Giovan Battista known as il Baciccio, oil on canvas, H. 172.2 cm; W. 247.3 cm; Depth 10 cm (dimensions with frame). MUDO – Beauvais  
© RMN-Grand Palais / Thierry Ollivier

The first chapter is an invitation to discover the **complex and exemplary humanity of these heroes**. No matter how extraordinary they are, they nevertheless remain human beings, driven by strong feelings that bring them closer to us. The poem's verses accurately describe emotions as diverse as Andromaque's faithful love for Hector, Helen's melancholy on the walls of Troy (painted by **Gustave Moreau** in the 19th century), Achilles' anger towards Agamemnon (represented by **Il Baciccio** in the 17th century), and Priam begging for his son's body. **The works brought together illustrate the way artists, inspired by these passions, have attempted to depict these heroic characters with very human feelings.**



**War, a central theme of *The Iliad*, has constantly stimulated imaginations down the centuries.** The warriors' equipment is very present in Homer's text. The poet describes with great precision the characters' arms – the breastplates, the helmets with their crests, the swords – how they were made and even how they were used: the sound of the weapons striking metal, the wounds made, etc. Episodes with duels have provided artists with opportunities for virtuosic depictions of various pieces of armour, notably the famous shield of Achilles, the central figure in **Peter Paul Rubens' painting, *Achilles Slaying Hector*.** The representation of this arm evolved according to period and artist; it was often adapted to take a contemporary form.



*Achilles Slaying Hector*, RUBENS Peter Paul, 1630, oil on panel. Musée des Beaux-Arts - Pau. © RMN-Grand Palais / Thierry Ollivier



*Sarpedon*, LEVY Henri, 1874, oil on canvas, H. 306 cm; W. 234.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay  
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Hervé Lewandowski

**Homer does not avoid death, a direct consequence of war – on the contrary.** In the epic poem, the poet recounts the death of almost two hundred warriors, Greek and Trojan. Present on Greek ceramics from the 6th century BC, the death of Sarpedon was represented from one period to the next with the same visual references, as illustrated by **Henri Lévy's** painting in the 19th century: the body of the Trojan hero is carried by Hypnos and Thanatos, winged genii personifying Sleep and Death. One of the other representations prevalent in the history of art is Achilles' degrading treatment of Hector's body, which is dragged behind his chariot around the tomb of Patroclus.

### ***The Odyssey*, a return to Ithaca filled with hazards**

*"Tell me, Muse, the story of that resourceful man who was driven to wander far and wide after he had sacked the holy citadel of Troy. He saw the cities of many people and he learnt their ways. He suffered great anguish on the high seas in his struggles to preserve his life and bring his comrades home."*

After allowing the Greeks to pillage the city of Troy, Ulysses sets off to return home, to the island of Ithaca, where his wife, Penelope, and their son, Telemachus, are waiting for him. ***The Odyssey* recounts this voyage, which is dotted with encounters and trials and that would last for ten years.** The regions the hero passes through are populated with monsters, wonders and traps: the god

Poseidon unleashes his anger on Ulysses, who dared to blind his son, the Cyclops; the seafaring hero crosses paths with Circe, the nymph Calypso, terrible sirens and the monsters Charybdis and Scylla. After returning home, he must once again demonstrate that ingenious intelligence that the Greeks call *metis*, in order to overcome the plot concocted by Penelope's suitors in his absence.



*Ulysses and the Sirens*, Marc Chagall, 1974-75, lithograph. A 20; Nice, Musée Chagall © musées nationaux du XXème siècle des Alpes-Maritimes/ Photo Patrick Gérin 2006; © 2019 ADAGP, Paris

**Ulysses' encounters with the monstrous creatures provided an inexhaustible wealth of subjects that artists have drawn on endlessly.** In Greece, the sirens and the Cyclops were the episodes most represented by black-figure and red-figure vase painters. Nevertheless, from the outset the question arose of how to put into images these figures, which Homer never describes very precisely. The poet says only one thing about the Cyclops: he only has one eye. But where is it exactly? Does he possess another that he cannot see with? These are questions that artists, have sought from one period to the next to resolve. The sirens with their "sweet song", about whom we know only that they took the form, have variously been given the form of birds, women-fish, and women playing the lyre. Down the centuries there have been different interpretations, from the **Greek paintings of the 6th century BC to the present day**, as reflected in the lithographs of **Marc Chagall**.

**While *The Iliad* is essentially a poem about men, *The Odyssey* assigns a much bigger role to female figures.** They punctuate Ulysses' voyage and, like monsters, confront the hero with a series of formidable trials: the nymph Calypso who attempts to seduce him and keeps him for seven years on her island, the sorceress Circe who tries to bewitch him with her potions, and the young Nausicaa, princess of the kingdom of the Phaeacians, whose hand is promised to him in marriage. The evil female figure, embodied by Circe, was very popular in Western European painting in the 19th century, as testified by the image created of her by **John William Waterhouse**. Just as cunning as her husband, Penelope appears as Ulysses' female double: having promised her suitors that she would give them her answer the day she finishes weaving her step-father's winding sheet, at night she unpicks the work that she has done during the day. Artists often represent her weaving, or waiting in a melancholic pose, as in the statue by **Antoine Bourdelle**.



*Circé offrant la coupe à Ulysse*, John William Waterhouse, huile sur toile, 1891, Royaume-Uni, Gallery Oldham © Bridgeman Images



Peintre D'Ixion (attribué à), Cratère en cloche campanien à figures rouges (Vers 330 av J.-C.)  
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski

**Above and beyond the adventures of Ulysses, the poem's central theme remains the hero's return to Ithaca.** While this theme has a symbolic dimension, that of a person discovering wisdom, it is also where Ulysses experiences his final adventures, the final stage of a voyage in which his exploits reach a culmination. Being recognised by his family was the first stage described by Homer, an event that was widely depicted by artists from the post-Renaissance period. Ulysses then has to succeed in the trial of the bow, by shooting one of his arrows through the twelve axe heads in response to the challenge laid down by Penelope, who promised her hand to the winner. This episode is one of the most difficult for artists seeking to illustrate it, as

Homer gave no precise description of how the challenge took place. Finally, those who were seeking to take the hero's place suffered his vengeance: the massacre of the suitors has been illustrated down the centuries, from the period of the red-figure painters (left) to the 19th and 20th centuries, as demonstrated by

the work by Gustave Moreau (*Les Prétendants*).

### The poems of the Epic Cycle: the story of the Trojan War



« Le Jugement de Pâris », Watteau, Antoine, 18e siècle.  
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Franck Raux

**Helen's abduction, the Trojan horse, the judgement of Paris, the death of Achilles:** we sometimes associate these famous episodes from the Trojan War with Homer's stories, but in reality some are not recounted in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, or are merely alluded to. They belonged to other poems that were lost over the course of time and which form, together with Homer's two poems, what is known as the Epic Cycle. They recount the entire conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans. They reveal the full extent of this body of epic literature from antiquity and serve as a reminder of how miraculous it is that Homer's works have been conserved. The best-known scenes include *The Judgement of Paris*, illustrated in the work by **Antoine Watteau (left)**. Paris is the young Trojan shepherd who, by giving the apple to the most beautiful goddess, and choosing Aphrodite, provoked the ire of Hera, Zeus' wife, who swore to exact revenge by making the Trojans suffer, leading to the destruction of their city. This grim outcome is achieved by means of the trap of the Trojan horse.



## “Homeromania”: a passion for Homer



Portrait de Victor Hugo, BONNAT Léon, 1879, huile sur toile, H. 137 cm ; L. 109 cm ; P. 8,5 cm (Dimensions avec cadre).  
Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon  
© RMN-Grand Palais (Château de Versailles) / Gérard Blot

Victor Hugo leaning on a book from Homer.

**Homer and his work have exerted an unprecedented attraction since antiquity.** The ancients invented the concepts of “Homerophile” and “Homeromaniac” to refer to readers keen to know the poet and imitate his heroes. From Alexander the Great to Victor Hugo, numerous artists, writers, politicians, conquerors and simple citizens have drawn from the poet’s works examples of how to live, how to behave and how to die. Homer was also the poet of art, and of objects and their making, as the philosopher Montaigne emphasised.

Homeric language abounds in words and expressions that realistically describe objects from various fields such as weaponry, furniture, cuisine, boatbuilding and clothing. In this sense, the Homeric epics constitute a “how to” manual that some artists were able to use to recreate the objects described by the poet. The derivative products, described by Victor Bérard as “homérieriques”, have adorned drawing rooms and libraries since antiquity, from Alexandria and Pompeii to Paris and Berlin.

Armed with these precise material descriptions, some archaeologists also believed they had found “relics” from the world of Homer during excavations in Greece and Asia Minor. Such cases emphasise how Homer’s material world has stimulated an exceptionally fertile urge to imitate.

## Homeric laughter

**The exhibition also highlights other creative genres, from cinema and music to the comic book and caricature, that have been influenced by Homer’s world.** The expression “Homeric laughter” is often used to describe loud, spontaneous laughter. The expression comes from Book I of *The Iliad*, which contains a description of the loud, transcendent laughter of the gods mocking Hephaistos. Pastiches of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which already formed a fully fledged literary genre in Greece and Rome in antiquity, show how authors and readers have always wanted to laugh with Homer. The person who, in the 19th century, most successively subverted Homer and his heroes in powerful, malicious caricatures was **Honoré Daumier**, represented in the exhibition by a hilarious series of comic drawings. Published in *Le Charivari*, a famous satirical periodical of the time, they had a strong political dimension: while mocking the academic reference to antiquity, Daumier was also attacking established power and privilege.



Honoré DAUMIER, *Ménélas vainqueur* (planche n°1 de *l'Histoire ancienne*), 1842  
© BnF



This Homeromania became stronger in the 20th and 21st centuries. In particular, **cinema reinvented the epic** by rewriting episodes from the Trojan War and the adventures of Ulysses: *Ulysses* (1954) by Mario Camerini with Kirk Douglas; *Troy* (2004) by Wolfgang Petersen with Brad Pitt; and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) by the Coen brothers, which drew on Homer to create an irreverent examination of modern life. The musicality of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* seems to have provided inspiration for the soundtracks to these films. As visitors leave the world of Homer, they will be bathed in the gentle sounds of music by great composers, including Claude Debussy (the *Sirènes*) and Monteverdi (*Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*).

### **The exhibition is generously supported by the Fondation Crédit Mutuel Nord Europe**



A partner right from the very beginning and a founding member of the circle of corporate sponsors, the Fondation Crédit Mutuel Nord Europe today also supports the temporary exhibitions of the Musée du Louvre-Lens.

Homer is the fourth successive exhibition it has collaborated on. Although the exhibitions ostensibly have nothing in common beyond the structure that supports them, they are nonetheless all aimed at a broad audience and undoubtedly help to revitalise region. The Fondation does not support a particular cultural theme; rather, it aids local institutions whose projects offer the region opportunities to flourish and develop.

### **PRACTICAL INFORMATION**

Exhibition from 27 March to 22 July 2019  
Open daily 10am to 6pm, except Tuesday

Free for under 18s  
18–25 years: €5 / full price: €10

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