

PHIL 7 goes to the Harvard Art Museums

Mariana Beatriz Noé

On the crisp morning of December 2, I led my PHIL 7 class, “Introduction to Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy,” to the Harvard Art Museums. For months, we had delved into the thoughts of Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, navigating through intricate concepts, arguments, and counterarguments. Yet, every civilization is steeped not only in ideas but also in tangible artifacts. The Ancient Greeks and Romans left behind coins, drinking cups, toys, pitchers, tools, dishes, graves, and a myriad of other objects. While texts offer us a fascinating glimpse into their minds, these artifacts open another door to understanding. I sought to present both facets to my students, so on that chilly Saturday, we ventured to the museum.

As we crossed the threshold of the Ancient Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Art rooms, we were greeted by the imposing presence of an Etruscan Sphinx from 550–540 BCE. These enigmatic creatures stood at tombs entrances, safeguarding the dead and their treasures. In ancient cemeteries, sphinxes of varying sizes adorned monuments of differing heights—a sight that must have been awe-inspiring. Yet, the students and I discerned a paradox inherent in the museum’s sphinx: once a guardian of the dead against intruders, she now guards the entrance to an exhibit showcasing the dead’s possessions.

Passing the sphinx, we soon found ourselves before a case brimming with ancient coins. In our contemporary world, we view coins as mere symbols of value. Melt a quarter, and it yields a modest spoonful of copper and nickel, worth less than the coin itself. But the coins in the museum’s cases, forged from silver and gold, held intrinsic value. Melt them, and they retained their worth in a different form. For the ancients, coins were far more than symbols. Among these treasures, my favorite is a silver stater from Knossos (Crete) dating from 300–270 BCE. This city was home to the legendary King Minos, who commissioned Daedalus to construct a labyrinth for his son, the Minotaur. The reverse of the stater reveals this intricate labyrinth.

Beyond the sphinx and the Minotaur’s labyrinth, the students discovered a third mythical creature lurking in the museum: a siren perched atop a bronze hydria—a water jar. Some students, expecting the enchanting fish-tailed maidens, were surprised to see the museum’s siren as a human-headed bird. Greek sirens were indeed avian, not mermaids. This revelation reshaped their understanding of the famous episode in the *Odyssey*: Odysseus did not fear the sirens’ seductive beauty, for they appeared quite fearsome. Instead, it was their mesmerizing song that posed the real danger.

