

Eleanor Allitt, Artist and

Storyteller

Eleanor's talk to the December meeting of the AMA showcased her skills both as artist and as storyteller. Beautifully pitched, with its quiet but deliberate stress on process and on sources of inspiration, targeted to the occasion, Eleanor took her audience with her for an exploration of her Cretan journeys. The travelogues were of her recent itinerant exhibition, for which Kingspan insulation, foam board, and locally cut bamboo, were the surprising but effective bearers. Eleanor gave us sufficient of the story of the God Hermes's theft of his brother's cows to establish context for her paintings. She told it with the same gentle but honest humour that had its counterpart in her visual depictions of a lumbering tortoise, of Hermes reversing the feet of the cows to confuse his brother Apollo, and of the play of the emotions that arched between the two God brothers.

Eleanor's own story, or perhaps it should be called saga, began with an invitation to be artist in residence at Amari. Once she had discovered that the nearby Patsos gorge had a former Cave temple of Hermes (now a church dedicated to St Anthony, complete with votive offerings) and that the legend of Hermes's theft of cows was both well known and locally centred,

Eleanor had the subject for her residency. It resonated with her longstanding interest in myth as a source of artistic and living inspiration, constantly renewed by its retelling. Visits to museums by way of background research yielded displays of frescos, broken and damaged, but with a still visible admix of stylised forms and realistic images, harmoniously painted in soft colours derived from natural pigments. These were reimagined in the broken edges of Eleanor's paintings, getting away from the superficial rectangle of her paper, in compositional elements, and in general colouration. Direct observation in Crete drew on the forms and colours of the flora and fauna of the region, including the filigree in delicate silvers, coppers and greys of heat dried summer vegetation, and their contrast with, for example, the vibrancy of the brightly coloured bee eater, an avian visitor who was clearly a delight. All found their place in ten paintings that retold the Hermes story. Eleanor's work characteristically has a spiritual aura, enhanced by the shimmering qualities of her predominately low key colouring. These were complex paintings, in both design and execution. They drew 'how' and 'why' questions from the audience. Eleanor's process proved to be manylayered, and was facilitated by her use of masking fluid (to reveal text and simulated crackleture below the overpainting) and by repeated scrapings down that gave both age and dimension to the work. Broken edges, multiple perspectives in both space and time within a single painting, stripped down forms, and Greek pattern elements, all paid tribute to the cultural heritage of her host country whilst being unmistakably of our own time and age.

There was a saga, too, in the staging of the exhibition. This in the end had to go ahead without the Art Centre at Amari or its director. For example, his excuse for Non communication was attendance at a 'Peanut Fair' [in polite AngloSaxon, but needing decoding, 'taking a dog for a walk'...]. With little more than a fortnight to go, the static exhibition abandoned Amari to become a travelling one, to be shown on bamboo easels (yet to be made); to be announced by megaphone (like the fish van); and to be shown two evenings at a time in six different locations that would include village halls and the patio of a tavern, and ended in a school temporarily converted into a gallery. In every sense, this was to be a journey of faith. The touring exhibition was, however a resounding success and strongly visited by both young and old. Indeed, it could have been a sellout had Eleanor accepted an offer from a local hotel. Instead, the hotel purchased and received giclée prints, sent from England after Eleanor's return.



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Eleanor Allitt, Artist and Storyteller (continued)

Her originals, bar their Greek title page, for which she substituted English text, are currently on show in a hospital; and an image of one of Eleanor's paintings is on one of Amari's websites, an indication of its effective impact. Closer to home, Arthur Evan's archaeological collections from Patsos, as elsewhere, are now a key part of the Ashmolean's Aegean collection.



Eleanor's work fascinates a local child on its tour of Cretan villages

Eleanor's textual source was Homer: but the Hermes legend has a number of variants. A clumsy but fairly complete translation including multiple variants listed at (A) below. A more readable version can be found at (B) Eleanor however gained her first insight into the tale from that most ancient of all media, the human voice and ear: an Amari farmer told her the local story. In short, Eleanor's talk on paintings inspired by a legend of the mischievous messenger of the Gods was a delightful and inspirational end to an enterprising A.M.A. year.

Margaret Condon

<http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/HermesMyths.html>

<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/h/hermes.html>