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**Headline:** Are We Ready for Great Art?



**T**HERE is nothing quite like meeting a naked Greek statue to send you scurrying to the gym. Check out those marble abs.

At the National Museum's current exhibition, Greek Masterpieces, priceless statues and artifacts, all 130 of them, from the Louvre (pronounced "LOO-v-re") are on show at the exhibition, which ends on 16 Mar.

But it's stone people, cracked pots and rocks, you say.

What's to see?

Well, come for the nudes, if nothing else. There's not a single flabby thigh around here.

"To the Greeks, ugly people were evil people," says museum guide Faizah Jamal, 48, leading a tour of students, tourists, aunties and uncles.

Well, we kind of think so too. But what was the Greek's beef with wearing clothes?

"The Greeks loved the human body, its beauty, its perfection..." the museum guide continues.

The story goes that at a race once, a competing athlete forgot to tie his loin cloth on properly.

As it flew off, the audience gasped. Then, as they watched the man pump his way unsuspectingly towards the finishing line, revelation fell upon them: The human body is a beautiful thing!

Henceforth, the Greeks declared that all athletes must compete in the nude.

Times have changed. You won't find the same thing at Beijing this August.

But it was the Greeks who gave us the Olympics.

### FAMILIAR NAMES

And Nike, Hermes, Attica and Adelphi.

We remember the Greeks these days with our shoes, handbags, clubs and malls.

But their real legacy lies here, these marble people in pensive poses, the sorts your uncle struck up in photographs taken in the '70s.

You stare at their empty eyes, at the panels and back at them, examining anywhere but there.

That's as far as the thrill goes.

Until your ears prick up.

"...So he ended up ejaculating on her thigh instead. The semen fell

onto the ground and from there, Erichthonius was born," so goes the guide at one exhibit.

Polite nods.

And at the next exhibit: "Homosexuality," the guide continues in her strawberry sweet voice, "was perfectly okay..."

Hums of appreciation.

The stories behind the marble, you'll find, are worthy of any Channel 8 serial.

"It's where the Fann Wong and Christopher Lee drama serials come from!" said Ms Faizah.

A pair of lovers rendezvous in hell. A Greek prostitute fights for her rights against the might of society.

A goddess stabs her son to death to avenge against her straying husband.

Sleazy? It's life. It's culture.

It's art. Which is a strange thing, of course.

For a few weeks now, banners featuring the Greek gods in all their nudity have hung on Orchard Road.

Not a word of protest. It's the Louvre, mind you. Don't be a prude.

But one single nude painting in a building's lobby can find offence.

Chinese artist Chen Xi's oil painting – of a nude woman covered

in soap suds – was taken down from the public atrium of the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts last February, after the Media Development Authority deemed it too provocative.

Nude or erotic artworks "should not be displayed in venues which are easily accessible to general audiences, including children and youths," the ministry said.

Protect the children, we must.

But at the exhibition, you'll find school children reverently studying the nudes, sketchpads on their laps.

"I like it because it gives me the ancient feeling," said Woo Junhong, 15, from Greenville Secondary School, looking at a partially-exposed Aphrodite holding out an apple.

Art teacher Chang Hock Boo, 30, took his class here to "learn the basics of sketching, how to differentiate between the male and female bodies, and how to show ageing."

Of course, there were the sniggles.

"At first, the boys went 'eeee' and the girls were very shy," said Fan Yi Bei, 14, from Dunman High School.

Maybe that's why, she points out, casting her eyes around the hall, "the boys are only drawing the boys and the girls are only drawing the girls."



## WHAT IS IT?

### What it looks like:

A love triangle, possibly from yet another sappy Korean drama.

### What it really is:

The saddest love story of all.

The poet Orpheus (far right) loved his wife Eurydice so much that when she died, he went to the underworld to rescue her.

Persephone, queen of the underworld, permitted him to take his wife back, provided

he did not turn back to look at Eurydice.

But Orpheus, doubtful of her presence, looked back and in that instant, lost her forever.

This is the painful moment depicted in this panel, with Hermes (far left), guardian of the underworld, taking the grieving Eurydice back to the underworld forever.

After this, Orpheus swore off women forever and took young men as lovers.

### What it looks like:

A boy playing hoola-hoop with his pet chicken.

### What it really is:

This is the story of a boy so beautiful that a god fell in love with him. Ganymede, the "most beautiful of mortals", was a Trojan hero carried away by Zeus.

The undone hair and the hoola-hoop represent his youth.

And the rooster? In those days, roosters – not chocolates or roses – were what lovers gave each other.



### What it looks like:

What else? A boy chats up a lizard.

### What it really is:

This is Apollo stalking a lizard.

Apollo, the son of the king of gods Zeus, possessed purifying powers and was able to defeat evil creatures.

And he didn't just kill lizards. Besides Lizard Slayer, Apollo was also known as the Rat Slayer and the Locust Slayer.

Weird kid, eh?

