

# Literary Tour of The Met's Ancient Galleries

Herodotus (with a little Homer and  
Thucydides)

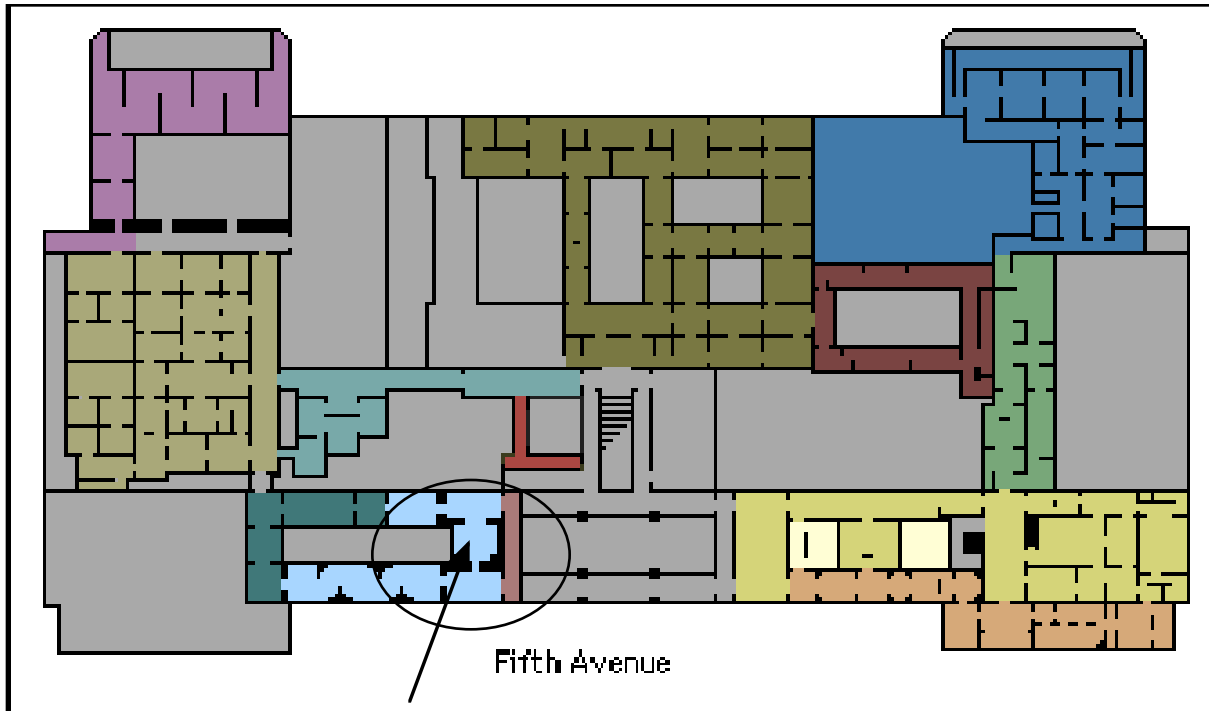
Developed by Phil Terry, founder of the nonprofit Reading Odyssey,  
Inc. and the Slow Art movement

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# Start here - Ancient Near East Gallery

2nd Floor - Metropolitan Museum of Art



# Slow Art principles

- \* Move slowly.
- \* Pick a few objects to look at for 10 minutes or more.
  - Palace of King Ashurnasirpal (first stop)
  - “Booty man” (my name for this ancient statue)
  - One cuneiform seal or tablet
  - Gudea
  - Babylon wall
  - One piece of cycladic art (first floor - not pictured in this guide)
  - The Lydian coins (first coins ever minted)
- \* You may choose to look at other pieces - but these above will certainly bring a lot of joy and interest
- \* Bring some friends and have them do the same and then have lunch to discuss.

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Reading Odyssey is a nonprofit dedicated to helping adults play with culture of all kinds - great books, art, science, philosophy, music and theater.

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## 1. Assyria - 2nd Floor of the Met

We start with the Assyrians neither because urban civilization started with them (it didn't - the Sumerians get that credit) nor because Herodotus started with the Assyrians (he didn't - he started with the Lydians). We start with the Assyrians because the Met starts with the fabulous palace of an Assyrian king.

“The Assyrians had been masters of upper Asia for over a period of five hundred and twenty years, when the Medes set the example of revolt from their authority.”

Herodotus Book 1, Chapter 95



This is the heart of the Assyrian Empire - though its boundaries extended far beyond this area.



## 1. Assyria (cont') - "Party like it's 879"

King Ashurnasirpal II

Northwest Palace at Nimrud 879 BCE

**Met 2nd Floor - Palace of Ashurnasirpal**



**[The King as Warrior and Protector of His People]** [I am] Ashurnasirpal, the obedient prince, the worshiper of the Great Gods, the fierce dragon, the conqueror of all cities and mountains to their full extent, the king of rulers, who tames the dangerous enemies, the [one] crowned with glory, the [one] unafraid of battle, the relentless lion, who shakes resistance, the king [deserving] of praise, the shepherd, protection of the world, the king whose command blots out mountains and seas, who forced into compliance the relentless, fierce kings from the east to the west at his very approach.



King in a ritual ceremony with an assistant (the king was both political and spiritual rule).



Human-headed winged lion

## 1. Assyria (cont')

What happened to the great Assyrians? They were overthrown.

In his introduction, Herodotus warns us about what happens to all great cities (and civilizations).

“...then I will proceed with my history, telling the story as I go along of small cities of men no less than great.

“For most of those which were great once are small today; and those which used to be small were great in my own time.

“Knowing, therefore, that human prosperity never abides long in the same place, I shall pay attention to both alike.”

Herodotus Book 1, Chapter 5

## **2. Dates in human (and earth) history**

Let's step back and review the whole context of human (and earth) history

**4.5 billion years ago** earth formed

**6 million years ago** hominids broke off from chimp ancestors

**200,000 years ago** homo sapiens sapiens

**50,000 years ago** culture - started painting walls, better tools

**12,000 years ago** agriculture

**5,000 years ago** urban civilization (writing, lots of people same place)

**3,200 years ago** Trojan War (about 1,200 BCE)

**2,800 years ago** King Ashurnasirpal II builds his palace in 879 BCE

**2,700 years ago** Homer writes The Iliad and The Odyssey

**2,580 years ago** King Cyrus born in 583 BC...overthrows Croesus, Babylon...and builds Persian Empire (550 - 539 BCE)

**2,500 years ago** Persian Wars

...the rest is history



### **3. Urban civilization - meet “Booty man”**

**Location: 2nd floor next to  
Ashurnasirpal Palace**



“Booty man” - as I call him - comes from the first urban civilization, the Sumerians. He greets you as you leave the palace of Ashurnasirpal II.

Don't get confused - you are travelling \*further\* back in time.

Ashurnasirpal II had his big party at his new palace in 879 BCE.

Once you leave the palace and say hello to “Booty man” you are travelling further back - now to the fourth millennium sometime around 3,000 BCE.

After you spend some time with “Booty man” turn left (left as you face “Booty man” and the big wall map behind him). To the left there are even older objects on loan from Israel. Those objects are from the seventh millennium. Remember them when we go down and look at the Cycladic art.

Then take a look at the large map on the wall and orient yourself to the ancient near east.

### 3. Urban civilization - writing

After you look at “Booty man” and the other great art in this gallery, spend some time with the collection of ancient writing against the wall just to the right of the map.

Agriculture began approximately 10,000 BCE - creating the surpluses necessary to eventually build all of civilization - including technologies like writing.

Urban civilization and writing, however, did not begin until about 7,000 years later - or about 3,000 BCE. Below are just two examples of early “Cuneiform” from approximately 1,500 years before the Trojan War and about 2,000 years before Homer wrote his epic poems.



## 4. Sumerians, Akkadians, Neo-Sumerians...



Meet Gudea.

As you leave the “Booty man” gallery and walk up the short steps you will be greeted by Gudea.

Gudea is a Neo-Sumerian ruler from around 2100 BC - about 800 years after the Sumerians first developed their civilization (The Sumerians collapsed. Akkadians took over. They collapsed. Gudea started rebuilding using the earlier Sumerian language and rituals as a way to harken back to the good old days and legitimize himself in the eyes of the gods and the people. Thus, he's the first Neo-Sumerian).

Look at Gudea and then compare him to his son, Ur-Ningirsu, Son of Gudea.

Also, go look for:

- Ibex on Stand (created using lost-wax technique)
- Chaplet on leaves (beautiful gold from a grave at Ur)
- Standing Male Figure
- Man Carrying a Box (compare these last two objects)

## 5. Troy

Not much from Troy here at the Met. There are some pieces from the region then known as Anatolia. Look around and think about Homer and about the Greeks of Ionia who helped start the Persian Wars.

“Speak, Memory -

Of the cunning hero,  
The wanderer, blown off course time and again  
After he plundered Troy's sacred heights.

Speak  
Of all the cities he saw, the minds he grasped,  
The suffering deep in his heart at sea  
As he struggled to survive and bring his men home  
But could not save them, hard as he tried -  
The fools - destroyed by their own recklessness  
When they ate the oxen of Hyperion the Sun,  
And that god snuffed out their day of return.

Of these things,  
Speak, Immortal One,  
And tell the tale once more in our time.

Homer, Odyssey, Lines 1 - 13



## 5. Troy (cont')

“Such then is the Persian story. In their view it was the capture of Troy that first made them enemies of the Greeks.”

# Herodotus Book 1, Chapter 5

“For though the events of remote antiquity...could not from lapse of time be clearly ascertained...yet the evidences which an inquiry carried as far back as was practicable lead me to trust...that there was nothing on a a greater scale...”

# Thucydides Book 1, Chapter 1.3



## 6. Babylonians

We have the words of Herodotus to accompany the few small fragments of ancient Babylon including the beautiful piece of wall from the Processional Way.

“Babylon ...surpasses in splendour any city of the known world.”

Herodotus Book 1, Chapter 178

“There are a hundred gates in the circuit of the wall, all of bronze with bronze uprights and lintels.”

Herodotus Book 1, Chapter 179

“Where they drive two hundred teams of horses...Out through each of its hundred gates.”

Homer Iliad, Book 9, 396



“This striding lion is from a double frieze that covered the walls of the Processional Way. The lion, symbol of Ishtar as the goddess of war, served to protect the street...”  
[The Met Guide, page 115]



## 7. Persians

Also not much from the might ancient Persian Empire. Herodotus' words go well with the beautiful gold cup inscribed with Darius' name and the piece of Persepolis on display.



The Persian Empire ...<http://www.socialstudiesforkids.com/articles/worldhistory/persianwars1.htm>

“...Persians were not only the best but also the most magnificently equipped...every man glittered with the gold which he carried about his person in unlimited quantity...”

Herodotus Book 7, Chapter 83

“...Xerxes, the son of Darius, reached [Europe] at the head of an army consisting of 5, 283,220 men.”

Herodotus Book 7, Chapter 186

## 7. Persians (cont')



This golden cup was given to King Darius, you know Darius quite well from reading Herodotus. It's exciting to see his name inscribed on this cup.



Look into the cup - it's a drinking vessel. Wow.



## 8. Scythians

This item may not be on display. If not, then enjoy Herodotus' reference to the enigmatic Scythians.

“The Scythians, however, though in other respects I do not admire them, have managed one thing, and that the most important in human affairs, better than anyone else on the face of the earth: I mean their own preservation.”

Herodotus Book 4, Chapter 46

“...no one who invades their country can escape destruction.”

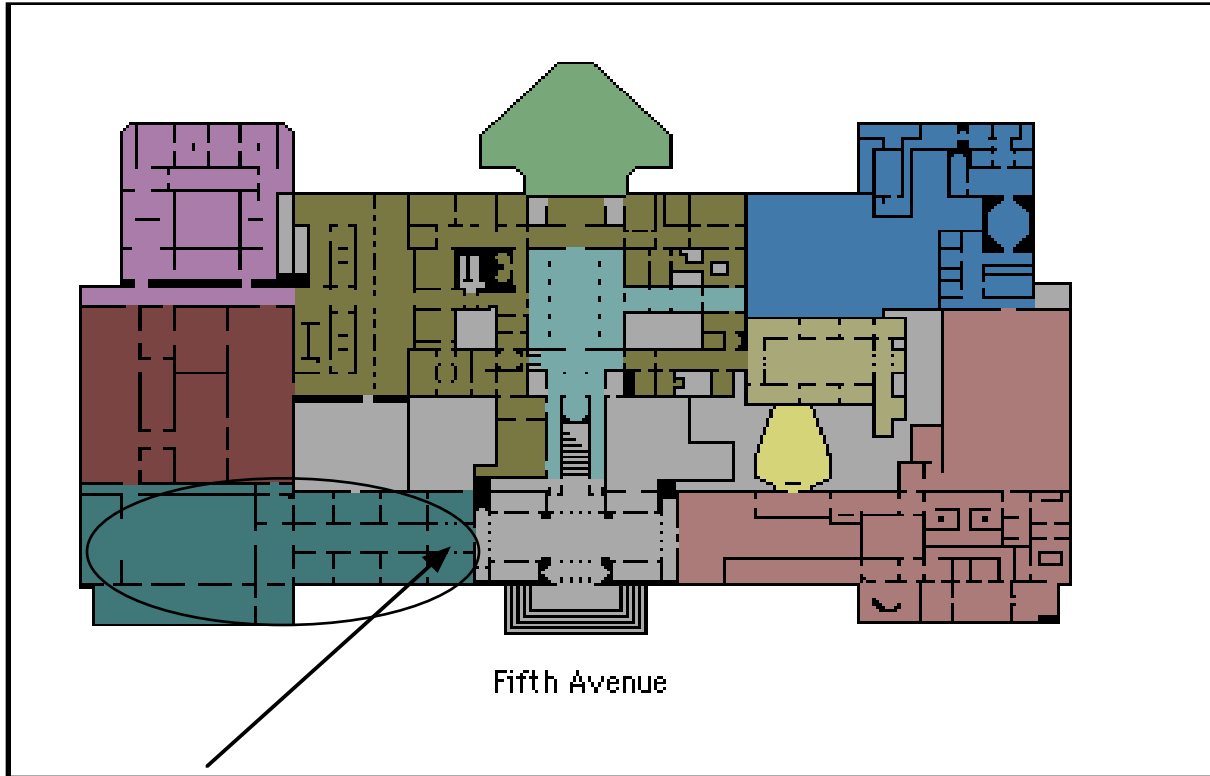
Herodotus Book 4, Chapter 46



**Dress ornaments**, Scythian; 5th century B.C.  
Eurasian steppes, Black Sea, Maikop (?)  
Fletcher Fund, 1924 (24.97.50-.51)

# Move to the Greek and Roman Galleries

First floor - Metropolitan Museum of Art



## 9. King Croesus

Herodotus begins *The Histories* with Croesus. He's blamed for being the first to subjugate the Hellenes and the one to start all the trouble.

“Before the reign of Croesus, all Hellenes had been free.”  
Herodotus Book 1, Chapter 2



“...Croesus entertained him [Solon]... instructed...to take him on a tour of the royal treasuries and point out the richness and magnificence...[and then asked him] who is the happiest man you have ever seen?”

Herodotus Book 1, Chapter 30

“...You seem to be very rich, and you rule a numerous people; but...Often enough God gives a man a glimpse of happiness, and then utterly ruins him.”

Herodotus Book 1, Chapter 32

## 9. King Croesus - cont'

In this gallery and just outside it, there are references to Herodotus. Can you find them?



“...They [Sparta] ... had a huge vase made in bronze, covered with figures of animals all round the outside of the rim, and large enough to contain three hundred amphorae, which they sent to Croesus as a return for his presents to them.”

Herodotus Book 1, Chapter 70

## 9. King Croesus - cont'



“...The Lydians were the first people we know of to use a gold and silver coinage and to introduce retail trade.”

Herodotus Book 1, Chapter 94

## 10. Roam the rest of the Greek and Roman Galleries

## Appendix - Egypt

“About Egypt I shall have a great deal more to relate because of the number of remarkable things which the country contains...

“Egyptians...seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind...

Herodotus Book 2, Chapter 35

“...The Egyptians first brought into use the names of the twelve gods, which the Greeks took over from them, and were the first to assign altars and images and temples...and to carve figures in stone.”

Herodotus Book 2, Chapter 4

...the Greeks trace their genealogy from the time when they first acquired the knowledge of them [of the Gods from the Egyptians].”

Herodotus Book 2, Chapter 147