

# PORTRAITS OF BARRY AND BURKE IN THE CHARACTERS OF ULYSSES AND HIS COMPANION FLEEING FROM THE CAVE OF POLYPHEMUS James Barry (1741-1806)

James Barry was a protégée of John Butts in Cork when the Statesman, Edmund Burke, spotted his talent. Burke became the young artist's patron and helped him travel and study in London, Paris and Rome. He took his inspiration from the colours of Titian and the composition of late classical works that he had studied in Rome. Barry believed he could combine the high ideals of history painting with contemporary issues to revive history painting for a new time. Despite the fact that history painting was out of fashion. His greatest work was a series of neo-classical paintings, *The Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture*, for the Royal Society of Arts in London. Barry was appointed Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy in 1779. His paintings were hailed, but he was expelled in 1799 for his radical political views and his disagreements with the Academy. He died in 1806 and was then honoured for his life's work by his old adversaries.



*Portraits of Barry and Burke in the Guise of Ulysses and his Companions Escaping from the Cave of Polyphemus* is a complex work. It shows in beautiful detail the classical tale of Ulysses, who hides under a sheep, to escape from the cave of the blinded Cyclops. Barry wanted to comment on the political situation in England at the time; America was pushing for independence and England was forcefully retaliating. Both Barry and Burke were against the British response, but in this portrait Burke is cautioning the more outspoken Barry.

## DISCUSSION

- Ulysses told the cyclops that his name was 'No body'. When Ulysses blinded him the cyclops shouted "Nobody has hurt me! Nobody has escaped! and his people did not come to rescue him. Can you think of a good way to escape the cyclops?
- Why do you think Ulysses has his hand to his lips?
- What is the cyclops Polyphemus doing?
- What do you think has happened to the man closest to the cyclops?
- Is the cyclops very big? How can you tell?
- Ulysses has travelled all over and he has had many adventures, describe what sort of land he is in right now.
- All the textures in the painting are made to seem so real, we can almost feel the wool on the sheep. What other textures seem real? Does the skin? The hair etc...?

- The men and sheep at the front (the foreground) of the painting are painted in a very detailed way, we can see the designs on their clothes and look into their eyes, what other close-up details can you see?
- The man he painted as Ulysses was a friend of his that he sometimes disagreed with, do they look like they are friends or enemies? Why do you think so?
- The artist believed art should teach us, what do you think we might learn from this painting?
- If you were to paint yourself into this painting, who or what would you be? (If you want to be the sheep, please remember you have to go back into the cave with the cyclops.)

## **IN THE GALLERY**

Find the painting *The Prince of Wales in the Guise of St. George* by James Barry (It may be right behind you).

Is the dragon in this painting painted as clearly as the sheep in the first painting? What detail can you see?

How can you tell it is painted by the same artist?

What sort of stories does James Barry seem to be interested in?



## **HANDS ON**

Imagine a scene of you escaping from the cyclops, use old magazines, paper, fabric and whatever you can find to do a mixed-media picture of this.

Find lots of fabrics and textures around your classroom such as wool, metal, cotton, velvet etc. Look at the fabrics and see what the surfaces are like, smooth or rough. Arrange them on your table and have a go at creating these textures with paint. Try putting on the paint really smoothly in some places, dab wet paint over dry paint, paint with your brush straight up, paint with your brush almost flat. Experiment to see what you can create.