

Will Odysseus/Ulysses return

José Teixeira

The setting

In 2017, as I was casually entering a women's accessories store, in downtown Lisbon, I found a metal hair clip in the shape of a laurel wreath. Its evocation of the myth of Daphne¹ brought a smile to my face and I instantly purchased two of those items, in silver.

Months later, I came upon the hair clips at my place of work, I opened and spread them out, to make a circular wreath out of them. At that moment I realized that, in its mixture of irony and delight, I found a theme for a new medal. I assembled the precarious construction with sellotape, placed it on a shelf in the library and waited for the right moment (fig. 1).

In 2022, at a meeting of the Lisbon University School of Arts' (FBAUL) Scientific Council, where I hold a place as member and Director of Post-graduate Studies, I was invited to create a medal for FBAUL. An artistic object

that might represent the institution, intended to distinguish retiring teachers and staff members, or to award entities they wished to honour.

I accepted the challenge with a mix of pride and apprehension; despite being flattered by the confidence thus entrusted, I knew it would be a hard task.

I started researching literary and iconographic references on artistic education and on the Convent of São Francisco,² which houses FBAUL.

What would be the most appropriate form for this theme? After a few weeks delving on the topic, I realized that, after all, I didn't need to continue searching for the ideal form, since the solution had been standing in front of my eyes the whole time. I would make a wreath inspired on two branches of laurel.



Fig 1. Prototype made from the metal hair clip



Fig 2. Laurel branches



Fig 3. Baroque angel
Marble relief that survived
the 1755 Lisbon earthquake
Lisbon University School of Arts (FBAUL)

The laurel wreath (figs. 2-3)

As I returned to work, I realized that the hair clip model was too stereotypical and that the design of the branch was unsuitable.

The project's design had to be based on natural laurel branches.

Since it was springtime, I decided to go on a hike in the Sintra Mountains (Quinta da Riba-Fria), crossing a humid area rich with laurel trees (*Laurus nobilis*) to 'reap the laurels' that would best fit the purpose.

At home, I propped the branches on A3 sized sheets of paper and photographed them. I selected two branches, represented them using vector drawing tools (Corel Draw) and had cut the set-in brass plate. When this was done, I curved both branches, crossed them, and bonded them into an X form, after which I modelled the leaves (to give them an organic semblance), thus concluding my prototype (fig. 4).

Although the laurel branch seemed appropriate to me, in its association with a Mediterranean heritage and representing the classical tradition linked to artistic teaching, I nevertheless felt that I needed something more specific to characterize the Lisbon University School of Arts – the largest, oldest (dating back almost two centuries) and most renowned institution of artistic education in Portugal.

Meanwhile, my investigations led me to a celebrated quote from Portuguese literature, 'And others whose immortal deeds / have conquered death's oblivion'³ which I would inscribe on one of the branches, and also to the image of a small baroque-style *putto*, a baroque angel



Fig 4. Vector drawing project
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that had survived the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, which I would use to bond the branches and provide context to the wreath, inscribing the institutional logo, series number and signature on the back (fig. 5).

Having concluded the project and the appropriate customized casing with the names of recipients, I considered the felicitous coincidence that the work might be included in an exhibition in Florence – a classical reference being shown in the iconic renaissance city.

The rose – Odysseus, Penelope, and the Trojan Horse

Along with the project I designed for the University, virtually at the same time I developed another medal, inspired on a red wool rose I had bought six years ago at a handcraft fair in Albufeira, Algarve.

Initially, I had an idea to make a small series as an homage to female embroidery crafts. I contacted a few women who knew how to do crochet, showed them the wool rose and invited them to knit a rose for me.

After some attempts made by two or three craftswomen with several different kinds of textile fabrics and different colors and textures, I realized that the results were unsuccessful and dull.

I suspended the project until I could make sense of it and feel that I was ready to pick it up again.

One day, I was looking at the rose, which I had placed on a shelf in the children's book section, and I had some kind of 'epiphany': the project would be about Penelope, the mythical weaver.

I recalled the boldness of the *Odyssey* narrative and associated with it, sometime later I had the idea of using magnetic tape from old audiocassettes to serve as crochet thread.

On my way to the studio, I discovered that the same case contained VHS tapes. I was extremely thrilled. While the idea of using cassette tape made me think of 'the siren song', the VHS tape took the project onto another symbolic dimension; no longer just the sound, but also the



Fig 5. *And others whose immortal deeds / have conquered death's oblivion*, 2023
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Golden brass, ~100 x 100 x 70 mm

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manufacture: Domingos Guedes Lda.

images, albeit encrypted, that would become part of the roses; each cassette, corresponding to a movie, contained a contemporary narrative, one that might be matched with an episode of the *Odyssey*.

Later, during a weekend get together with family and friends, someone gave me a wool cap. I thanked the kindness and invited the eighty-year-old craftswoman, who had knitted it, to make me some roses out of magnetic tape.



Fig 6. *The red wool rose*

Two weeks later, when she brought me half a dozen samples, I was both satisfied to know that it was possible to use VHS tape and disappointed with the shapes of her roses, which did not please me.

Meanwhile, I came across a student at FBAUL who was crocheting, I approached her and showed the red wool specimen and asked if she would be able to make roses based on that model (fig. 6).

She accepted the challenge and, two or three days later, showed me her version.

I liked what I saw and smiled. I had found ‘Penelope’.

We agreed on a fee, and I commissioned twenty roses;⁴ as many as the years it took Odysseus to return to Ithaca after the Trojan War.

Months later, while selecting the medals to send to FIDEM, I had a provocative idea; why not show the rose, together with the laurel wreath, thus interweaving a fictional narrative?

Considering my experience in previous FIDEM editions, I assumed that the chance of having two of my works selected would be slim, so I conjured up a way to trick the jury. The rose would act as my own ‘Trojan Horse’. I would show the rose at FIDEM without revealing my authorship, thus recreating, here and now, the famous mythical deception.

I needed an accomplice; I spoke with Filipa Clemente, who had crocheted the roses, and asked her if she would

like to play the part of Penelope, helping me disguise my Trojan Horse. She relished the irony and smilingly agreed to present, under her name, the work entitled *Will Ulysses/Odysseus Return*, signed by ‘Penelope MMXXIII’.

Shortly thereafter we found out that the rose registered under the name of the student Filipa Clemente,⁵ signed with the pseudonym ‘Penelope MMXXIII’ had been selected. We rejoiced with laughter. The ‘trojan horse’ had penetrated the system; like a ‘program’ akin to the homonymous ‘malicious software’ was being executed (fig. 7).

What did this mischievous trick intend to achieve?

1. Weave a narrative that would revalidate the myth?
2. Bring some fresh air into the serious atmosphere and graveness of the Jury?
3. Show an additional piece (the rose), that would otherwise run the risk of being excluded from this edition of FIDEM?

Yes! – Although the chance to show the rose pleased me, the real motive had to do with the possibility of questioning the mechanisms of institutional workings and of reflecting about the concepts of authorship and identity; issues which have been a source of debate in the art world since the second half of the twentieth century.

Besides that, I also took the chance to question the conceptions of credibility and reality, notions whose increasing ambiguity renders them relevant today; consider, for instance, the phenomenon of fake news and the widespread use of artificial intelligence (AI) which is



Fig 7. *Will Ulysses return*, 2023
Penelope MMXXIII
Magnetic tape, crochet, ~100 x 100 x 40 mm

increasingly contributing to fade the borders between the human and the cyborg, between the real and the virtual, between human imagination and digital fiction.

Ithaca, the fascination with Mediterranean legacy

Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so, you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.
Ithaca gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.
And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have
fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of
experience,
You'll have understood by then what these
Ithakas mean.
[*Ithaca* poem by C. P. Cavafy (1863–1933)]

My taste for literature, philosophy, the history of religions goes back to adolescence and, also, my fascination with mythology, namely Graeco-Roman.

As I think about this, I am reminded of a colleague I met in the 1980s, while I was a student at António Arroio Secondary School,⁶ who gave me a Dictionary of Mythology,⁷ saying that 'it had no use at home and I would know what to do with it.' It surprises me that someone who hardly knew me would venture to place in my hands a work that she thought might interest me, even before I realized it myself.

As I developed this project, I came to realize that my imagination was frequently drifted towards the *Odyssey*, whose full version I reread twice over the last five or six years.⁸

At a certain point, I decided to become a player in the narrative myself, by bringing features of the millenary epic poem into the creative process – yes, this project – being conceived with such an icon of Renaissance culture as Florence in mind, would lead me to revisit classical Antiquity and be embodied as a singular voyage to 'Ithaca'.

The laurel wreath, a symbol of the hero Odysseus travelling through the Mediterranean Sea, submitted to adverse circumstances is, in his discovery of the world, akin to the artist, whose process follows an indeterminate course. The rose, as a paradigm of beauty, evokes Penelope who, as the cunning and desired lover, paradoxically signals charm and deception: 'And others whose immortal deeds / have conquered death's oblivion.' Thus, the rose echoes the Homeric epic and celebrates Portuguese classical and Renaissance culture.

Regarding the legend, in her work *The Human Condition*, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, referring to classical culture, compares the concepts of labor and work. Regarding the labor she characterized it as a metabolic activity that keeps the body alive and ensures animal survival. But work, in turn, affords a few humans the possibility to become immortal by evading the inevitable oblivion of death. We should note that, according to this worldview, nature, animals, and the gods of the Olympus were considered immortal, whereas humanity was considered mortal, above all because humans become aware of their finitude. The only way to deceive time and oblivion emerges through the work of heroes, whose 'immortal deeds' resist the irrevocable erasure of time and remain, through culture, in the memory of contemporaries.

Florence, at last – Tourism as a way of life, sponsored by Renaissance taste

By resorting to a symbol as ancient as the laurel wreath associated with the myth Daphne and the coronation of heroes, I feel I have gone against the tide of a certain strain of contemporary art, described by Mario Perniola as idiotic⁹ and lacking in symbolical substance.

I know that today very few believe in myths, although we see majorities adopting irascible behavior and supporting childish, albeit violent and irrational populisms.

I know that today very few believe in culture and in the spirit, although many idolize and pay homage to 'influencers' on the social media. I know that today everyone knows everything, although little is known about the world, about ourselves and the universe.

I know, like Socrates, that I still know next to nothing.

However, if today I have chosen to evoke the symbolism of the laurel wreath, it is because I feel as a ghost when crossing the traffic of cultural tourism in Florence.

Today I watch the world as a tourist, a passive observer who follows the routes of common places, previously set out by the agents of the local cultural industry.

Today I am a traveller, idle, uncurious, and impatient, another anonymous pawn lost in the crowd.

Today I know that I arrived under the illusion of discovery, but what I actually, long for, is my return.

A return to Ithaca?

Yes, to the utopia of all Ithacas.

I know that Odysseus/Ulysses is alive, I rediscovered him this year in Florence.

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NOTES

1. Some everyday objects are steeped with subliminal meanings, implicit in symbolic features deposited in successive historical-cultural layers.

2. Calado, 2000.

3. Camões, *Lusíadas*, I,2, vv. 5-6.

4. A series of 20 numbered pieces and three artist's proofs.

5. Fashion degree student at Lisbon University.

6. A prestigious institution of technical and artistic education in Portugal.

7. Hamilton, 1983.

8. Portuguese translation by Frederico Lourenço, 2003.

9. Perniola, 2000.