

Mary Beard: A don's life | Column

Ariadne at the train station

By **Mary Beard**



I am not a huge admirer of the development around Cambridge station. I may yet be proved wrong, but I can't help but think that in fifty years time it will look like all those seedy areas that have a habit of cropping up around railway hubs (perhaps the new St Pancras and King's Cross have reversed the trend - but we shall see).



“Ariadne Wrapped” by Gavin Turk

Anyway, there is now a bright spot on the horizon. As part of their obligation to provide some public art, the developers of “CBI” (as it is called) have given us [Gavin Turk’s “Ariadne Wrapped”](#). It’s a riff, first, on the famous ancient statue of the “[Sleeping Ariadne](#)” (as she is now known) in the Vatican. It used to be identified as Cleopatra because she wears a serpent-style armlet, which was assumed to be a live asp - and so the Egyptian queen at her suicide. But by the early nineteenth century, the armlet was re-identified as an armlet and the whole figure reinterpreted as Ariadne.



["Sleeping Ariadne" at the Vatican Museums](#) / Image by [Wknight94](#) licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

Ariadne helped the Athenian “hero” Theseus escape from the labyrinth in Crete, after he had killed the Minotaur - but on the way back to Athens, the bastard dumped her on the island of Naxos (though there was a “happy ending” in that the god Dionysus came to Ariadne’s “rescue”). What the statue shows is Ariadne asleep between the dumping and the so-called rescue.

This is what underlies Gavin Turk’s statue, with a twist - because the outline of the famous Ariadne is clear enough, but she is wrapped up in sculpted paper and string. There she is, but you can’t actually see her! The message? Well, antiquity is still with us, but always a bit buried? Come to Cambridge and we will unwrap this for you?

More interesting though is the clever conversation with de Chirico. There are plenty of [de Chirico paintings](#) which feature the same Ariadne, but I had never noticed quite how like the background of those paintings is to the [façade of Cambridge station](#). So Turk is really recreating de Chirico’s Ariadne in a new Cambridge setting. What’s not to like?

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Maybe Cambridge North should have a wrapped Venus de Milo or caryatides since they're in need of an arm or two which are locally available. *(Edited)*

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