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## The Nike of Samothrace's presences during the XX and XXI centuries: mysteries and victories

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**Abstract** Despite its fame, the Winged Victory of Samothrace keeps on fascinating not only every visitor of the Louvre museum, but also the eye of the connoisseur. Despite its recent restoration in 2014, some of its mysteries might indeed never be solved, like the identity of its sculptor. But this fascination also comes from the statue itself, its majestic aesthetics and lack of head, in a similar fashion perhaps to the loss of the Venus of Milo's arms. Since her discovery more than 150 years ago by Charles Champoiseau, she has been on the throne at the top of the Daru stairs at the Louvre Museum. This hellenistic masterpiece, that Champoiseau called a "mousseline de marbre", became a must see in the Paris museum, together with the Mona Lisa and its other chefs d'oeuvre. But this statue's fate is not set in stone. Many modern artists, like Omar Hassan or Xu Zhen, have tried to make it their own and give it a new depth. Recently, Beyonce and Jay-Z also offered a new perspective by including this Louvre masterpiece, among others, in their political masterpiece, the video clip "Apushit". This paper seeks to decode the meanings and symbolism of these new versions of the Nike.

**Keywords** Nike of Samothrace – sculpture – polychromy – victories – modern art

## A HEADLESS GODDESS

The Nike of Samothrace (Fig. 1), a three meter high statue made of white Parian marble, was found without arms nor head in 1863. Designed to fit in the Sanctuary of the Great Gods in Samothrace, it was probably commissioned to commemorate a Rhodian naval victory over Macedonians, which may have taken place in 190 B.C. This personified goddess of Victory is a winged figure represented in flight, as if she were ready to land on a ship's prow. Experts believe that the statue, placed high on the hill of the Sanctuary, welcomed the pilgrims, as she now welcomes the Louvre's visitors at the top of the Daru stairs. Some coin representations suggest that the Nike held a trumpet, a garland or a ribbon in its right hand, and a sceptre in its left.

Archaeologists were instantly fascinated by the virtuosity of its drapery. The fabric perfectly fits this female body's curves as if the wind had flattened it. This is not an isolated example in Greek sculpture. The technique, called wet drapery, can also be seen on the famous frieze of Nike adjusting her sandal. As one can see when reading his letters, Charles Champoiseau immediately felt the importance of his discovery:

Le reste est presque intact et traité avec un art que je n'ai jamais vu surpassé dans aucune des plus belles oeuvres grecques que je connais. Les draperies sont tout ce que l'on peut rêver de plus ravissant: c'est de la mousseline de marbre, collée par le vent sur des chairs vivantes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Other pieces are nearly intact and made with an unchallenged skill among the most beautiful Greek masterpieces I've seen. The quality of the drapery is astonishing and delightful: it's muslin, made of marble, flattened by the wind on living flesh." Charles Champoiseau's letter to the Marquis de Moustier, French Ambassador in Constantinople, April 15th 1863.



**Figure 1** Nike of Samothrace, Photo © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Philippe Fuzeau.

## VICTORY'S POLYCHROMIES

### Blue Victory

Ludovic Laugier,<sup>2</sup> who was in charge of the recent Victory's restoration, found some traces of blue pigments on its wings. The Ancient Greek statues polychromy was discovered early in the XIX century, but it took nearly two centuries for the most sceptical of scientists to admit it. Yves Klein, a modern French artist, invented his own colour in the 1950s, the International Blue Klein (IKB), and used it on his own version of the Victory. One piece from this series was sold at auc-

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<sup>2</sup> Hamiaux, Laugier & Martinez (2014).

tion in 2014 in Paris.<sup>3</sup> The blue Victory sheds a new light on the white and still statue. Indeed, the IKB pigments use a specific type of powder which can express movement through the effect of shadow and light.

### Tagged Victory

In a way, Omar Hassan also reminds us about polychromy and challenges our own view of a white and spotless Antiquity. Indeed, the young artist didn't use one colour like Yves Klein or Pascal Lièvre did, but used aerosol to graffiti the statue in multiple colours in several creations. In 2012, he created a multi-coloured Nike, mainly in blue, red and purple. In 2017, he used blue and yellow on his "Little Nike" (Fig. 2), colours which are well attested to have been used on ancient Greek sculptures, and with which the painter is quite familiar from his previous work "Irripetibili" (Unique) based on the Venus de Milo. It may be at first a proper way to talk about the ancient Greek sculptures he works on, many statues we found are actually Roman copies of lost Greek originals. Moreover, his creations use classic masterpieces sometimes several times, like the Victory of Samothrace, and these multiple copies show, on the contrary, how these icons aren't unique but open to modern art and new techniques, perhaps endlessly. Because of the way the splash of paint seems to randomly run over the sculpture, his works might be perceived as provocative, disrespecting these masterpieces. Yet, it rather seems to represent a bold tribute to polychromy and ancient art, which Hassan likes to use as a base for his own creations.

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<sup>3</sup> Cornette de Saint-Cyr (2014).

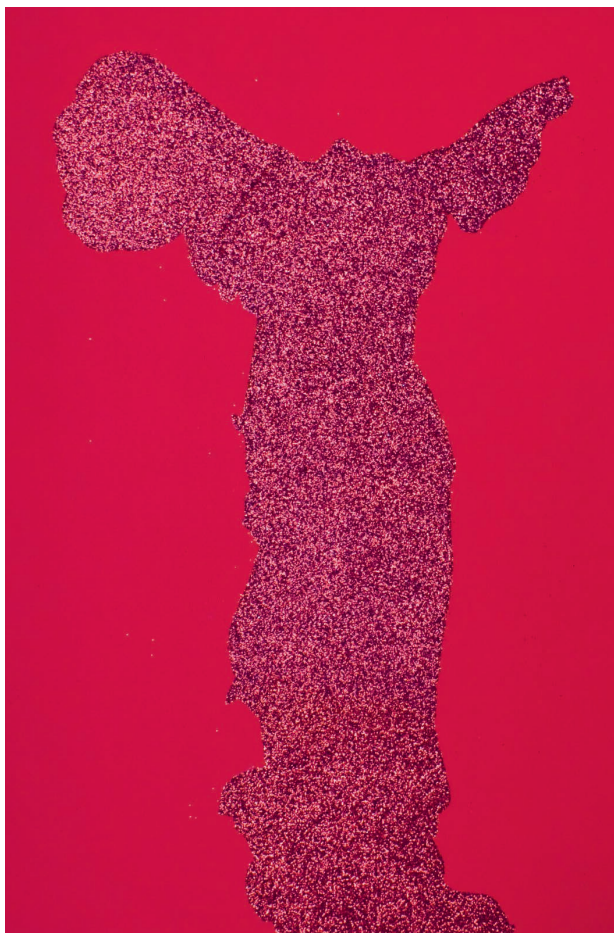




**Figure 2** *Little Nike*, Omar Hassan. Mixed media on plaster sculptures, 60cm. 2017, <https://omarhassan.art/albums/sculptures/> (last accessed 08/10/2021).

## Red Victory

In another, also provocative way, Pascal Lièvre made a *Red Glitter Victoire de Samothrace* (Fig. 3) in his 2010 Paris exhibition, called *Bad Romance Solo Show*. He used this technique for other famous ancient masterpieces, like the *Discobolos* or the *Laocoon*. Red and glitter assuredly recall Paris' night life and through this technique the artist also gives these classical sculptures a new identity, as pop and queer. Red had already been chosen by Givenchy in 1991 for a fashion show, and Victor Skrebneski's photograph (Fig. 4) is clearly influenced by the Nike of Samothrace's drapery and flying movement – likely drawing from Audrey Hepburn's red dress in the 1957 movie *Funny face* and its famous scene of Hepburn descending the Daru Stairs, imitating with her red veils the flying movement of the statue behind her.



**Figure 3** *Red glitter Victoire de Samothrace*. Pascal Lièvre. 2010. Acrylic & glitter on canvas. 39,37 × 31,49 Inches, <http://lievre.fr/red-glitter-victoire-de-samothrace/> (last accessed 08/10/2021).





**Figure 4** *Givenchy Red*, Photograph by Victor Skrebneski. 1991, <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/295590/victor-skrebneski-givenchy-red-paris-american-negative-1990-print-about-1995/?dz=0.5000,0.6323,0.44> (last accessed 08/10/2021).

## VICTORY'S REMAKES

### Victory in a Box

Other artists have, in a way, tried to demystify the Nike of Samothrace. In 1987, a British modern artist, Edward Allington, created 99 small blue and yellow Victories in boxes. This work, called *Victory Boxes*, challenges the unique status of these classical Greek sculptures, and offers a reflection on plagiarism, art's replicability and perhaps even assembly-line-work. These multiple victories also show how fragile and precious the one and only Nike of Samothrace can be.

## Upside-down Victory

The Nike of Samothrace can also be viewed as part of a larger consideration of western and eastern art and civilisation, as in Xu Zhen's "Eternity", now exhibited in Paris, at the Louis Vuitton foundation (Fig. 5). The artist associated an upside-down Nike, along with the ship's bow, on top of a Bodhisattva's body.<sup>4</sup> Both sculptures are headless. Xu Zhen's career has been rising since he took part in Venice's Biennale in 2001. His series "Eternity" and "Evolution" create culture shocks by mixing icons of western sculpture with eastern and other cultures, such as African masks and Buddhist paintings. As Pascal Bernard mentions in



**Figure 5** Xu Zhen, *Eternity-Winged Victory of Samothrace, Tianlongshan Grottoes Bodhisattva*, Fiberglass, steel, cement. 626 × 460 × 230 cm | 246 7/16 × 181 1/8 × 90 9/16 inch. © Courtesy Perrotin. 2013, [https://www.perrotin.com/fr/artists/Zhen\\_Xu/302/eternity-material-winged-victory-of-samothrace-tianlongshan-grottoes-bodhisattva/38589](https://www.perrotin.com/fr/artists/Zhen_Xu/302/eternity-material-winged-victory-of-samothrace-tianlongshan-grottoes-bodhisattva/38589) (last accessed 08/10/2021).

<sup>4</sup> Buddhist who is one step away from becoming a Buddha.

his paper, the Chi-nese artist denies such claims on his work, and encourages us instead to focus on the material quality of his art pieces:

Rejetant en bloc l'interprétation d'une différence, dans le cas de la victoire de Samothrace, entre le dynamisme de l'une et le calme de l'autre, ou d'une équivalence entre l'histoire de l'art oriental et occidental [...], Xu Zhen invite à apprécier les qualités plastiques de son travail: "On croit souvent qu'une réflexion Est-Ouest traverse mes oeuvres. Un enfant ne réagirait pas de cette façon. Il trouve cela beau, c'est tout." (Beaux-Arts magazine, 02/2016).<sup>5</sup>

## IN THE NAME OF VICTORY

### Victory and marketing

The famous sportswear brand Nike, owes its name to the generic Greek word for victory, but it is also a clear visual reference to the Nike of Samothrace. Indeed, the visual logo is supposedly an upside down representation of one of the wings of the statue. This logo, called the Swoosh, means a rushing or sweeping sound, and therefore may also recall the flying sound of the statue's wings:

It looks like a wing, one of us said.

It looks like a whoosh of air, another said.

It looks like something a runner might leave in his or her wake.

We all agreed it looked new, fresh, and yet somehow – ancient. Timeless.<sup>6</sup>

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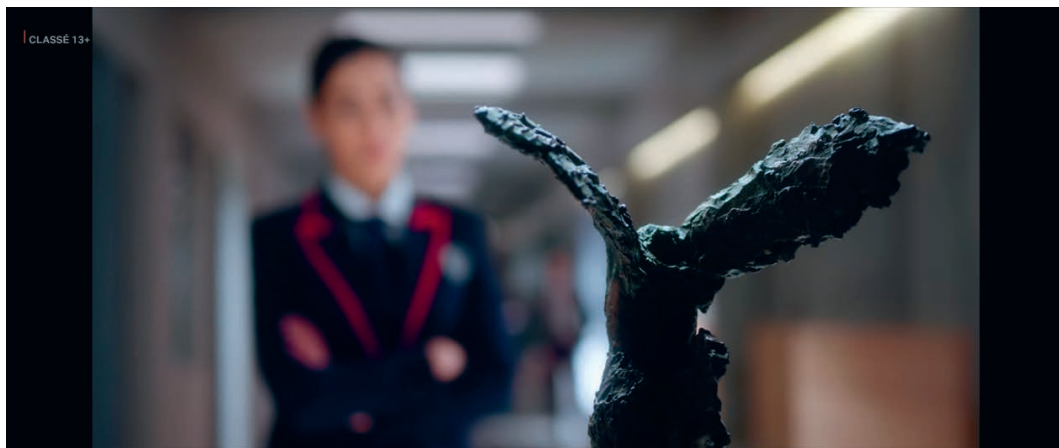
5 "About his version of the Nike of Samothrace, Xu Zhen rejects outright the idea of a contrast between the energy of one statue and the stillness of the other, as well as the equivalence between eastern and western art history. Instead, he invites us to appreciate the plastic quality of his work: 'Most people think that my work is imbued with a consideration on Eastern against Western societies. A child wouldn't think this way. He finds it beautiful, that's all.'" Bernard (2016).

6 "Il ressemblait à une aile pour l'un d'entre nous, à un souffle d'air pour un autre ou encore à ce qu'un coureur pourrait laisser dans son sillage. Nous étions tous d'accord pour dire qu'il faisait neuf, frais, et pourtant aussi un peu ancien. Bref, intemporel." Knight (2016).

This marketing choice is effective in two respects: by reference to sporting victory; and echoing the athlete's effortless and speedy run.

### Victory and Elite

We can also see a Victory of Samothrace in the recent Spanish Netflix series "Elite". Though the presence of this object seems at first anecdotal, it becomes central to the plot. Indeed, in the posh and prestigious high school "Las Encinas", the famous masterpiece is the trophy<sup>7</sup> all students wish for. The Victory gives the best student the opportunity to enter a great school in Florida, followed by a prestigious Ivy League University. If there is no historical reference to, or any explanation for the choice of the Victory as a trophy in the first episode, the teacher's aesthetical judgement that the "trophy is rather ugly" is quite an amusing wink to this work of art – though the only one. The bronze statuette is exhibited in a showcase of the high school, quite visible to all students, as a reminder of what is at stake (Fig. 6). Here, the Nike is above all a symbol, of academic success, but also, perhaps, of the dangers of ambition, since it is later used as murder weapon at the heart of the series' plot.



**Figure 6** *Elite*, So1 Eo1 Carlos Montero. 2018, Screenshot Netflix.

<sup>7</sup> The statue has also been a trophy in the medical field since 1946, for the Lasker Medical Research Awards, which usually precedes a Nobel Prize in Medicine. It could embody a Victory over sickness and death.

### 'I can't believe we made it'

Last but not least, the Victory of Samothrace has been given a new light in Beyoncé and Jay-Z's latest video clip, "Apeshit", which recounts their success story, as echoed in the lyrics "I can't believe we made it". The Carters privatise the Louvre museum for one night to pose next to several masterpieces of the French museum, including the Mona Lisa, dressed in haute couture. The video clip shows four ancient sculptures: the Great Sphinx of Tanis, the Nike of Samothrace, the Venus de Milo and Hermes Fastening His Sandal, alongside several paintings depicting ancient scenes, like David's *Intervention of the Sabine Women*. Next to these white and spotless statues, Beyoncé, along with her husband and black backing dancers, makes a political statement about black beauty and black feminism.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the opposition between black and white skin colours and fabric seems central to the video clip's visual power. In front of the Victory of Samothrace, Beyoncé's frenetic dance contrasts with the statue's inertia, and recalls its first location, as a ship's figurehead. Her white dress, made of multiple light layers, is also close to the statue's *himation* and recalls the high quality of the sculpted drapery. The dancer's choreography on the stairs also recalls the waves, or the rowers' movement (Fig. 7). This statue wasn't chosen by chance: it embodies the Carter's success story and their desire to make these



Figure 7 *Apeshit*. Beyoncé and Jay-Z Carter. 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Bièvre-Perrin (2018).



classic icons, mostly western and white, and sometimes claimed through western history by racist cultures such as Nazism, their own. The video clip is also a reminder that this white and aesthetically perfect antiquity is a fantasy. Some didn't react well to their project, some because of the tremendous amount of money the Louvre is thought to have received from the Carters, but also for the clip's eccentricity, interpreted as a provocation towards academic art. However, their song also shows some welcome open-mindedness in modernising and shedding a new light on our dear Victory of Samothrace.

## CONCLUSION

The Nike of Samothrace is omnipresent in modern pop culture. In some cases, this is through a mere reference to its name or a visual background in cinema, television series or even marketing. However, some references have a deeper meaning and the symbol of Victory can become political. In any case, the wealth of art products based on this Victory shows the fascination it still holds today and how – even if we may think we know it – the statue still has some unrevealed secrets, and can offer new modern reinterpretations.

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