

Antiquities in a Contemporary Context: The University of Melbourne's Classics and Archaeology Collection

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Abstract

Originally developed as a teaching and research resource the Classics and Archaeology Collection is one of the University of Melbourne's oldest cultural collections. From the initial donation of five Egyptian papyri in 1901 the collection has expanded through field work and acquisitions to become one of the most significant antiquities collections in Australia. Recent teaching and research, exhibitions and donations, student projects and public programs are discussed to demonstrate the new role the Classics and Archaeology Collection has assumed in the wider debate on antiquities and controversies over our shared cultural heritage and thorny issue of who owns the past.

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Originally developed as a teaching and research resource the Classics and Archaeology Collection is one of the University of Melbourne's oldest cultural collections. From the initial donation of five Egyptian papyri in 1901 the collection has expanded through field work, acquisitions and donations to become one of the most significant antiquities collections in Australia. This paper briefly presents an overview of activity – teaching and research, exhibitions and related programs – to demonstrate the role the Classics and Archaeology Collection has assumed in recent years.

The University of Melbourne and Classics

The tradition of Classics at the University of Melbourne is visually demonstrated in the

University motto and emblem. The University of Melbourne motto – *Postera Crescam Laude* – is Latin for 'growing in the esteem of future generations'. The University emblem is Nike, in Greek mythology a winged goddess who personified victory, the Roman equivalent was Victoria.

The discipline of Classics is as old as the University. It was established in 1854 and was one of the four original foundational chairs. Even though the study of Classics in Australia has undergone many changes since 1854, the University of Melbourne is still renowned as a centre of excellence in this area. Students in large numbers study Latin and Ancient Greek, and other Classical and Ancient World Studies. In 2010 there was a significant increase in enrolments in these subjects. It is fascinating to explore the history and development of particular disciplines and language teaching, as they represent an indicator of social and cultural trends, priorities and values. Contributing to the success of Classics and Ancient World Studies has been the development of a range of complementary programs drawing on the Classics and Archaeology Collection, now housed at the University of Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum of Art.

The Ian Potter Museum of Art

It is often noted that university museums are unique among museums, in that they reach wide audiences whilst simultaneously making important contributions to scholarship and the education of students. This role and responsibility has certainly been demonstrated at the Potter with particular reference to the Classics and Archaeology Collection. One important role of the university museum is the enrichment of the curriculum. Direct engagement with objects can enhance teaching and learning outcomes and enrich conceptual engagement with curriculum in a wide range of disciplines. At the Potter there is the opportunity to engage with the Classics and Archaeology Collection from many different perspectives and for many different purposes.

Prior to 2005, the Classics and Archaeology Collection was presented in what can best be

described as a traditional – ‘Pitt Rivers’ style – installation: objects, in glass vitrines, arranged systematically, by period and region, with little thought of integration with the wider teaching curriculum. Traditionally static and fixed exhibitions can reinforce distance between the work and the viewer and can dictate ways in which the works will be understood. At the Potter we have the opportunity to remove some of the real or perceived barriers to enable a more direct experience of the object.

Interestingly, the previous Curator of the Classics Collection, Peter Connor, anticipated the way the Collection is now used. He observed that the vases offered the greatest scope for usefulness in class and for attracting students who were not especially involved with the visual arts or the material culture of the ancient world. The object is a very powerful transmitter of information. By removing it from the display case the object becomes even stronger in its ability to attract and engage the viewer. When offered ‘hands-on’ opportunities with selected works from the teaching collection in supervised settings, students have direct and immediate access, the level of engagement is increased and the learning experience intensified.

A key aim of programs at the Potter is to increase awareness of the richness of the University’s collection. Access to the Classics and Archaeology Collection helps in the exploration of issues around the question of why the past matters and facilitates the development of innovative ways of making the objects and ideas relevant to contemporary tertiary students. Recent curriculum engagement activities have involved working with students in programs such as the Masters of Teaching which prepares students to teach Classical Studies, History, Humanities and Visual Arts in primary and secondary schools and obvious Undergraduate disciplines such as Classics, Archaeology, and Art History, as well as less obvious departments such as Australian Studies.

The Classics and Archaeology Collection

Like the goddess Athena, the Classics and Archaeology Collection at the University of

Melbourne was born fully-armed and mature. Since its inception in 1901 the Collection has been enhanced through purchase and donation. Today there are approximately 5000 objects in the Collection: they come principally from Greece and Rome, and Egypt and the Near East – reflecting the teaching and research interests of the two former departments of Classics and Middle Eastern Studies.

These vastly different objects which make up the Collection have fascinated people’s minds and stirred their imaginations for millennia. The highly visible legacy of the material culture of the ancient and Classical world, uncovered by generations of archaeologists, may be examined and interpreted to understand the development of these complex societies. The richness and cultural diversity of the Classics and Archaeology Collection highlights profound and universal human concerns: mythology and belief, life and afterlife, devotion and ritual, identity and society, power and authority, gender and status, ethnicity and culture.

Classics and the Contemporary Context

One primary objective is to make the Collection meaningful for contemporary students and to seek new ways to engage with and talk about the past within the context of an antiquities collection at a university museum. In order to achieve this objective it is necessary to:

- Cross traditional boundaries
- Challenge traditional thinking
- Integrate different and non traditional disciplines

The wider art collection of the Potter provides significant opportunities to explore the Classical heritage, demonstrating the ongoing significance and influence of the ancient world. The following works, for example, highlight this legacy:

The Leckie Window 1935

Created by Napier Waller in 1935 for the original Wilson Hall (destroyed by fire in 1952) at the University of Melbourne and now installed at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the *Leckie Window* displays a twentieth century interpretation of

Classical iconography (McAuliffe, C. & Yule, P. 2003, pp. 280–281). We see Artemis (moon goddess), Apollo (sun god), Ceres (representing agriculture), and Prometheus (who gave the gift of fire to humanity), we also see the historical figures, the poet Sappho and the sculptor Phidias.

Norman Lindsay Crete 1940

In his 1940 painting *Crete* Norman Lindsay references the ancient world through his image of Minoan frescoes from Knossos (McAuliffe, C. & Yule, P. 2003, pp. 80–81). He intends to shock and to provoke his conservative Australian contemporaries through his re-imagination of an exotic, indulgent and passionate past.

Cultural Rubble 1993

More recently, in 1993, Christine O'Loughlin created *Cultural Rubble* – the sculpture on the façade of the Ian Potter Museum, by making moulds of casts of original works in the Louvre (McAuliffe, C. and Yule, P. 2003, pp. 62–63). In doing so she explored the development of contemporary Australian artistic identity and reflected on the way in which our society is distant from, but profoundly shaped by, fragments of European art and culture.

An aberrant history of sports hydration 2010

As an entrant in the 2010 Basil Sellers Art Prize at the Ian Potter Museum, Juan Ford has created *An aberrant history of sports hydration* in which he makes deliberate visual references to Classical Greek Black Figure vase painting, displaying the images on a contemporary water vessel through anamorphic projection (Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2010).

These four examples highlight the on-going power of Classical imagery and ideas in a contemporary context.

Antiquities and the ethics of collection, display and use

Another important area where the Classics and Archaeology Collection is playing a role is in the wider debate on antiquities and the controversies

over our shared cultural heritage and the issue of who owns the past. Through tailored classes at the Potter, for University of Melbourne students, discussions have been developed centred on such questions as:

- *What are the consequences of collecting antiquities?*
- *What are the political and economic implications of fakes?*
- *What is the relationship between museums, fakes, and collecting?*
- *What are some of the ethical problems facing museums?*

Using the Greek vases (both original and reproductions) in the Collection, issues of authenticity are explored. The exercise develops analytical skills, technical knowledge, and discerning judgement. In a similar manner a discussion is focused around the importance of provenance in terms of archaeological, historical and socio-cultural contexts. Related issues discussed are collecting and the acquisition of artefacts obtained on the art market, and problems such as looting. Another important issue is that of interpretation. Museums frequently treat ancient artefacts solely as art objects, inscribing them into a new context whereby much of their original significance is lost. There is often no consensus on some of these complex issues but the important point is to provide an opportunity to explore the questions and encourage an informed dialogue. Such a process enables students to experience rigorous intellectual engagement with these ideas.

Conclusion

In summary, the key ideas underpinning this approach include:

- The importance of the museum experience in providing direct engagement with the object
- The pedagogical opportunities to explore innovative ways of teaching and learning
- The issues of curatorship and custodianship in terms of conservation and exhibition of the collection
- The ethical responsibility for a university museum to enable

broad access for students, staff and the public

- The ongoing influence and value of the Classical legacy and the ancient world

Positive feedback received from students involved in the program demonstrates the success of this approach to teaching and learning in an experiential context:

- 'seeing the antiquities up close and handling them was definitely a highlight'
- 'the tute in the Potter was one of the best I have ever had'
- 'a highlight of the course was getting to the Potter and the hands-on experience with the objects'
- 'the best discussions this semester were the ones about museums, owning and presenting the past'

References and suggested readings

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About the Authors

Amanda Burritt's role is a new one for the Ian Potter Museum of Art and, indeed, for an Australian university art museum. As Curator of Academic Programs, she works with academics across a range of undergraduate and post-graduate disciplines to develop and deliver curriculum based programs using the collection and exhibitions. Dr Andrew Jamieson's role is a joint one – Curator and Lecturer – involving the Ian Potter Museum of Art and the Centre for Classics and Archaeology, at the University of Melbourne.

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