THE ANTIQUITIES MUSEUM

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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The R. D. Milns Antiquities Museum is one of the foremost collections of Mediterranean antiquities in Australia. This short article briefly examines the museum’s history and place in The University of Queensland and The School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, as well as highlighting some of its current and future research and education goals. Founded in 1963 with a university grant and growing to its current size with several thousand artefacts and several thousand visitors each year, the museum continues to be of great importance and value to the study of Classics at UQ and in Queensland. The collection is currently curated and directed by Dr. Sonia Puttock, a lecturer in Classics and Ancient History at UQ with research interests in Greco-Roman jewellery and adornment, museology and religion.

The R. D. Milns Antiquities Museum is one of several collections based at The University of Queensland and has a history dating back to 1963, in association with its parent discipline of Classics and Ancient History, which was a foundation discipline in 1910. Over the past forty-seven years the collection has been under the custodianship of a variety of curators and directors, assisted by a number of other staff and volunteers, many of whom are recognised as important figures in their respective fields. It is one of the leading antiquities collections in Australia and therefore, in the university’s centenary year, it seems appropriate to briefly reflect on the collection’s history, and also to take some time to examine its recent achievements and future goals as it moves towards its fiftieth year.

The foundation piece of the collection is a beautiful red-figured amphora of the Nolan type, decorated with a scene of Dionysus with a kantharos and thyrsus.1 At the time, the piece was purchased from Sotheby’s in London at minimum cost because of its fragmentary condition with a university grant and the assistance of R. M. Cook, well known for his work on Greek ceramics. The choice of piece is significant in the history of antiquities collections as the connoisseurship of Greek vases in both black and red-figure is a traditional basis for the foundation of such collections. Since these beginnings, the collection has grown to house over 5000 artefacts and fragments. Over the years it has been on display in several different locations, with the current position in the Michie building being its latest, if short-lived, incarnation.

Since the movement of the collection to its new premises in 2003, visits to the museum have increased dramatically. In the six months to July 2010 there have been over 1600 paying school students

1. The kantharos is a vessel used for drinking wine and the thyrsus is a rod with vine leaves or a pinecone attached to the tip. Both are symbols of Dionysus, the ancient Greek god of wine and ecstasy.

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from around Queensland and New South Wales visit the collection and almost 1000 visits by the general public, already exceeding 2009 totals for the year. The Museum currently employs a team of nine tour guides, two administrative staff and a wide variety of volunteers at all levels, in addition to Dr. Sonia Puttock, the current curator and director. A publication featuring highlights of the museum’s collection is currently being prepared for release in 2012, and a selection of the most significant pieces from the collection are being researched by staff and research higher degree students for publication in academic journals.

In recent years the museum has also seen changes to its very successful tour and workshop programme, with the introduction in 2010 of several new workshops, targeted at the current Queensland high school syllabus for ancient history, and incorporating four sets of artefacts from the museum as handling collections. These workshops provide a unique opportunity for visitors to gain access to ancient artefacts in a controlled environment, and, with the implementation of the Australian ancient history syllabus in the coming years, the programme will continue to evolve to maintain a high level of education. Workshops are usually accompanied by a guided tour of the antiquities museum collection, which has been significantly developed over several years by the efforts of Dr. Puttock, with the purchase of several noteworthy pieces. Most recently, a large Roman funerary stele from the Syrian trading site of Palmyra was purchased and is a key feature in the museum’s collection. Also purchased over the last few years have been a silver finger ring with an enigmatic inscription, a gold earring decorated with a goose (currently part of a major exhibition of ancient jewellery at the Nicholson Museum, Sydney) a figurine of the eastern goddess, Astarte, two baldric phalerae (military decorations), a Roman military diploma, and a large Roman altar from the Germanic frontier. The museum has also been enriched by donations from several sources, including papyri, ceramics, and coins, as well as the loan of many ancient brooches from the collection of one of the advanced volunteers, Mr. Marc Hunter, who also works at the local primary school, sharing his love of Roman history.

The museum has also benefited from the recent upgrade of signage by Mr. Daniel Press, adding considerably to the aesthetics of the museum and the public’s access to information about the artefacts. In the last several years the use of the collection has also increased through the agency of Dr. Puttock’s Antiquities Museum internship programme, which is run in semester two each year. It is one of the great success stories of the museum as a teaching collection and continues to have a strong application rate. This year there have been four interns who have undertaken a variety of tasks, ranging from cleaning to conservation and research, and have curated a final display entitled ‘What Lies Beneath: the Archaeology of Burial in Pre-Roman Italy.’ This internship is the only such opportunity in Queensland for archaeology, ancient history, or museums studies students to undertake training within an antiquities collection. The collection is also heavily incorporated into UQ’s ancient history major, ensuring that most students graduating with a degree in Classics and Ancient History will have had access to the museum at some point.

The future of the museum looks bright, although 2011 may be a lean year, with the museum moving into temporary accommodation whilst awaiting its new space on level two of the Michie building. This is part of a major refurbishment project and will provide an excellent new space for the collection, including a brand new teaching lab for volunteers and students, as well as much-needed exposure to the public and the wider university community. With the continuation of publications and other research projects, the academic profile of the museum will receive a much-needed boost. These ventures include an ongoing 3D scanner project in conjunction with UQ’s School of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering, involving the digital reproduction of pieces from the antiquities collection for teaching, research and conservation, as well as ongoing research for museum publications. The

2. Mrs. Rebecca Georgiou, Atlas Travel, Brisbane.
3. Mr. Jonathan Peters, on behalf of his late parents, residents of St. Lucia, Brisbane.
4. Mr. Raoul Phillips of Kedron, Brisbane.
museum will also move to a newly-digitised database system for its entire collection, allowing greater international research and regional teaching access to the collection. It is hoped that the new museum space will also provide opportunities for in-house conservation and other lab work, as well as increased teaching opportunities, more displays and a further development of the internship and high school teaching programmes.

Recent experiences seem to suggest that the future will only see an expansion of the museum’s research and educative output as it moves towards its fiftieth anniversary. Thanks to the guidance of Dr. Puttock, her enthusiasm and unique blend of skills with regards to collection and development, the R. D. Milns Antiquities Museum continues to be one of the most successful of UQ’s museums and one of the best in Australia. It is hoped that plans for the future will only enhance the museum’s profile and develop its role as one of the foremost research and teaching collections in Australia, building on its strong foundations and support within the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics and helping to raise the school’s profile nationally and internationally.