

Engaging with Classics and Ancient World Studies: Museum Learning and the *Between Artefact and Text* exhibition

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The 'Between Artefact and Text' exhibition in the Classics and Archaeology gallery at the University of Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum of Art provides an engaging space for teachers and students interested in Classics and ancient world studies. The objects featured in this exhibition are situated against the backdrop of four great literary works from the ancient world: the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, the Egyptian Tale of Sinuhe, Homer's Iliad and Virgil's Aeneid. The installation combines ancient literature with over 70 objects serving as a useful study aid to schools teaching ancient history, classical studies, ancient Greek and Latin; and particularly for VCE students reading Homer and Virgil.

The University of Melbourne's Classics and Archaeology Collection at the Ian Potter Museum of Art is one of the oldest antiquities collections in Australia. Comprising approximately 5000 objects, many pieces in the Classics and Archaeology Collection reflect the cultures of the ancient Near East, Egypt, Greece and Rome. Some of the finest pieces of this collection are on display in the Potter's Classics and Archaeology gallery, until the 19th of April (2015), in an exhibition titled 'Between Artefact and Text'. Besides showcasing some excellent examples of ancient bronzes, papyri, glasswork, pottery, worked stone and terracotta figurines, the exhibition is a rich source of learning, developing skills across various humanities disciplines. Within the exhibit, the featured objects are situated against the backdrop of four great literary works from the ancient world: the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Egyptian *Tale of Sinuhe*, Homer's *Iliad* from ancient Greece and Virgil's *Aeneid* from ancient Rome. This combination of text and artefact, celebrated in the title of the exhibition, is one that is of great value as a teaching resource at all levels. It helps impart to students a well-rounded perspective of the sources of knowledge available, their transmission from ancient times to the modern day and the methods that can be used to interpret them. We here propose

the Potter museum exhibition as an engaging out-of-classroom environment, in which skills are imparted through practical experience and exploratory engagement, an essential complement to learning methods centred on lectures and memorisation.

Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome are all great civilisations of the ancient world: each one imbued with particular linguistic, social, religious and political systems. On one level these different societies are characterised by distinctive cultural developments and unique literary traditions. On another level connections and influences are clearly discernible in material remains. Though the exhibit is clearly divided between the four civilisations, one occupying each quarter of the gallery, it is clear that knowledge and ideas were transmitted between neighbouring regions. Evidence of this cultural evolution and interconnection is demonstrated in the record created by the artefacts and texts on display in the exhibition and is highlighted on the panels that accompany them. It is a space filled with spreading artistic styles and evolving cultural influences. In the curatorial selection and arrangement of objects two groups, one inner and one outer, emerge. Objects in the central or inner display cases emphasise human or figurative form. In some instances the cast of characters allude to figures represented in the literary works. In the external free standing cases the objects are functional and utilitarian, and grouped according to material: metal, stone, ceramic and glass. The different mediums reinforce technical and stylistic traits associated with each of the civilisations. By way of the exhibit, these objects are able to inhabit a realm created and reinforced by the unfolding narratives represented in the literature. Several published editions of the literary works selected from the University of Melbourne's Special Collections held at Baillieu Library are also included in the exhibition.

By including such a variety of objects and materials 'Between Artefact and Text' brings together a number of different foci in Classics and Ancient World Studies, and indeed the



humanities and social sciences on the whole. Visitors to the gallery are invited to walk among the display cases engaging with objects and panels that reference the material and literary remains of the ancient world. There are a number of narratives that the curator puts forward in the display. Besides pertaining thematically to the realms of traditionally separate disciplines the displays also call upon a number of skills. There is a clear prompting towards visual analysis, as is expected in modern museum exhibits. However, this is not merely analysis of the objects' aesthetic appeal, though that did carry some weight in the selection process. Rather it is an examination of the visible physical characteristics of an object, elements such as form, colour, decoration, material and marks of the fabrication process, all of which can be interpreted to help determine styles, dates, locations and methods. This is the basis for much archaeological and art historical research, with elements of more in depth chemical and computerised investigation. Beyond this methodology, the panels also direct readers to consider literature. They make references to the four key ancient epics as well as stories from the Bible, allowing students to

make a comparison between different texts. Where in most exhibitions these two branches of knowledge are kept separate, or one is privileged over the other, here both methods are given equal authority, the viewer constantly moving between the realms of artefact and text. As the Ian Potter Museum of Art is a centre of object-based learning, one of the core elements of this installation as experienced by students remains the physical artefacts. Rather than imposing a ready-made narrative upon the student, the exhibition suggests a range of subjects and questions that students can engage with while examining the objects. This makes the gallery a perfect setting for exercises in critical visual analysis, as well as a starting point for individual or group projects focussed on a specific theme or object. Indeed the gallery space and the collection housed within it are often used in teaching modules at university level on repatriation, object recording and conservation. As each civilisation includes a selection of tools, vessels and figurines that demonstrate a variety of materials, manufacturing techniques and contexts; the nature of the projects can be tailored to fit any curriculum.

The figurative objects along the central cases for example could be used in researching any of the four civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome. The styles, iconographies and materials show differences, but also similarities and exchanges between the cultures being showcased, providing rich grounds for comparative study. For a more focussed project the stand-alone cases allow a more in-depth analysis of specific themes connected to the ancient world. The Mesopotamian section for example has two cases of decorative objects and weaponry made of bronze. The panel below these pieces discusses the novelty of metal working technologies in Mesopotamian times as well as a number of references to the process from contemporary sources. The adjacent cases contain a selection of Egyptian stonework that indicates the materials and forms employed in pharaonic times, the panel even indicating the qualities and particular uses of the different stones. Besides these more material characteristics the exhibit goes on to discuss the funeral context in which the objects are often found. The Greek objects are dominated by pottery with a variety of styles, forms and provenances. As the cases are often completely detached the vessels can be seen from all angles, an option that is often not available in other galleries or museums. This ultimately allows for a better understanding of the object, specifically its composition and iconography. In the Roman section, by contrast, the cases are not filled with painted pottery but rather with glass objects. Other objects on display from the Roman period include works in terracotta, marble and bronze. Each civilisation can thus be studied by its own specific material traditions, or in relation to the artefacts of its neighbours within the exhibit.

The textual sources adhere to a similar display framework. Each section is prefaced by an explanatory panel describing the narrative of the best-known epic from that civilisation. For Mesopotamia this is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, widely recognised as one of the world's earliest and finest literary works. The epic follows the heroic exploits of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk (in

present day Iraq), as he embarks on a journey of self-discovery and strives for immortality. The feature of the next section is the *Tale of Sinuhe*, considered by many Egyptologists to be the finest piece of literature to survive from ancient Egypt. The story represents a period that witnessed a flowering of Egyptian culture, especially in literature and writing. The palace official Sinuhe's self-realisation that his life was meaningless away from his home in Egypt is the thematic centre of the poem. Homer's *Iliad* is put forward as an epic bastion of Greek culture. In poetic form it describes an episode in the Trojan War, a particularly important episode in the legendary past of Greece. It is a tragedy and is full of contrasts between gods and mortals, divine and human heroes, war and peace. Homecoming, respect, honour, wrath and fated death are key themes represented within it. Latest in its conception is the *Aeneid*, one of the world's great epic poems, written in Latin by the Roman poet Virgil. It tells the story of the wanderings of the Trojan hero Aeneas. In telling the story of Aeneas's peregrinations, Virgil honoured the many virtues of the Roman people and established Rome's historical rule as part of a divine plan. He also glorified the emperor Augustus, whom he represented as a direct descendant of Aeneas.

In addition to outlining the basic narrative of the epic, each panel also describes its period of conception, the method of its transferral, the materials upon which it has been written, the versions of the text that exist, the literary genre and stylistic form it takes, its meter and length. Altogether these panels provide ample information for a literary comparison between the four pieces. Not only that, but they also make reference to biblical narratives, showing that the influences between ancient texts extends further than many would have guessed, through to narratives of the present day. This continuing influence is further emphasised in the textual artefacts dotted throughout the exhibition. From nineteenth century rewritings of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to oaths on papyrus fragments in Greco-Roman Egypt, to clay tablets with Bronze Age cuneiform inscriptions, these fragments



show continuities and disparities across time and space. Even the scripts in themselves, the language systems of these four great civilisations, watermarked behind the rows of figural objects, can be seen as a source of information, a source of comparison which stimulates students to inquire further into the cultures that produced these great works.

As the above examples demonstrate, the aim is not to isolate artefact and text into display cases and panels, but to bring these two together, to contextualise both in existing historical knowledge in order to broaden and revolutionise pre-existing understandings of object and text. It is easy enough to conceptualise artefact and text as different discourses, to be used for vastly divergent forms of research. Text in this instance can be approached as the translation of thought into the written word, while objects are manufactured utilitarian goods. However, the exhibit dispels such understandings as simplistic. Texts are not just disembodied streams of consciousness but are also fabricated,

made into objects through the process of writing. Similarly objects are imbued with meaning, much like a text, each piece with its own syntax through which the message is communicated. The information objects and texts provide can diverge or overlap, which is why both are necessary to construct a more comprehensive vision of the ancient world. Together the literature and material that has been brought down to us from the four civilisations featured in the exhibit give us an insight into how the people living in these times conceptualised their worlds. Our interpretation of these sources in turn determines our own approach to history and other subjects, the narratives we construct and remember. Thus the skills learned through encounters with the material and literary remains of the ancient world, can help us to understand our own contemporary culture, our roots and how these have affected our present and may go on to influence our future.

This has widespread implications for the use of the 'Between Artefact and Text' exhibit and

other displays like it, in the world of education. The importance of both visual and textual analysis skills for the creation of this exhibit, led to a collaboration between historian, archaeologist, curator, conservator and many more. As a visitor you are required to take on aspects of these various roles, appreciating the variety in skill and knowledge that is required for a full understanding of the events of the past. The museum experience becomes more than just an exciting trip away from the classroom, it is also a lesson in analytical skills, an opportunity for students to develop their own interpretations of material, learning by praxis rather than just memorising by rote. Though this article has focussed on the potential of the exhibit to broaden the scope of school and university students, the museum is dedicated to lifelong learning, and the exhibit benefits any visitor who actively engages with the display.

In summary, the 'Between Artefact and Text' exhibition highlights key Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman objects in the Classics and Archaeology Collection; a collection that was originally established with students of Classics and ancient world studies in mind. Within this new display, the skills to understand Classics and ancient world studies are taken out of the classroom into the public sphere. The significance and relevance of these areas may be simply stated. Classics and ancient world studies lie at the heart of humanities and its core mission remains, as it has always been, to explore what it is to be human. The civilisations of Greece and Rome, together with those of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia are the foundations of the modern western world, and having a thorough understanding of their histories and languages can help in a surprising number of ways.

Between Artefact and Text: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome in the University of Melbourne Classics and Archaeology Collections

Saturday 25 Oct 2014 to Sunday 19 Apr 2015

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The University of Melbourne
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E potter-info@unimelb.edu.au
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Opening hours
Tuesday to Friday 10am to 5pm
Saturday and Sunday 12 noon to 5pm
Monday closed

Curriculum Links:

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCE HISTORY 7

Ancient world (Investigating the past; The Mediterranean world: Egypt, Greece, Rome)

VCE CLASSICAL STUDIES Units 1-4

Unit 1: Mythical worlds
Area of Study 1 – Heroes and monsters
Area of Study 2 – Myth and archaeology
Area of Study 3 – Myths in art and literature
Unit 2: Classical imaginations
Area of Study 1 – Society through culture
Area of Study 2 – Classics through time
Units 3 and 4: Classical worlds

VCE CLASSICAL GREEK

VCE LATIN

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