

# The Classics and Archaeology Collection

## Inspiring secondary students in the Goulburn Valley

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### Introduction

Objects from the Classics and Archaeology Collection feature in a University of Melbourne project that involves selected secondary schools in the Goulburn Valley. The project, Object-Based Learning: An Aspirational Educational Pathway for Students in Rural Victoria, was funded in its first two years by University of Melbourne Engagement and Equity Innovation grants. It involves pupils who are studying ancient history in Years 7 and 8.

### Object-based learning (OBL)

Object-based learning has variously been described as object-based enquiry, object-centred learning or object-inspired learning. The essence of each of these definitions is the active use of objects in the classroom or on excursions.<sup>1</sup> An object could be an artefact or artwork, a book, manuscript or archive, or a facsimile of one of these things. The object under study becomes the central learning point, enabling a concrete understanding of abstract concepts.<sup>2</sup> If text and objects are studied together, they provide different insights and strengthen understandings.<sup>3</sup>

Active encounters involving OBL are often far more memorable and informative for a student than the



more passive experiences of reading from a book or listening to a speaker. When asked ‘Has learning with objects increased your interest in studying history?’, 66 per cent of Year 7 students and 90 per cent of Year 8 students who had participated in the project answered ‘Yes’. And in response to the question ‘Did looking at ancient objects increase the amount of information you could remember?’, 73 per cent of those in Year 7 and 95 per cent in Year 8 replied ‘Yes’.

### The Goulburn Valley project

The Goulburn Valley project responds to research that suggests that disadvantaged students and students in rural schools who visit a museum will display stronger historical empathy<sup>4</sup>—an understanding of how historical events have helped shape society today—and demonstrate a substantial improvement in their knowledge of objects and in their ability to think critically about them.<sup>5</sup> Preliminary findings after the first two years of our project support this thesis, and thus testify to the value of integrating OBL into the secondary school ancient history curriculum.

We selected the Goulburn Valley in response to the University of Melbourne’s *Engagement at Melbourne 2015–2020* strategy, in which six programs are set out, including making a ‘cultural impact’ and advancing educational opportunity in this particular part of Victoria.<sup>6</sup> Schools participating in the first two years were Kyabram Secondary College, McGuire College, Mooroopna Secondary College, Numurkah Secondary College and Shepparton High School.

At each participating school, every Year 7 student joins a 90-minute class presented by the authors. In addition to this, the Year 8 students are given the option of attending a

**Opposite:** Year 8 students from Mooroopna Secondary College, Numurkah Secondary College and Kyabram Secondary College, decorating Greek vases at the National Gallery of Victoria.

**Below:** Beaker; Egypt, Predynastic period (Naqada I–II), c. 4000–3100 BCE; ceramic (Nile silt): burnished black-topped red ware, height: 20.0 cm. 1968.0041, purchased from the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada, 1968, Middle Eastern Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

separate presentation that builds on their experience of the previous year. The very high Year 8 participation rates reflect the positive Year 7 experience. The Year 7 session includes a presentation on the life of an archaeologist; a classification activity that demonstrates the sorting of excavated material; examination of authentic pottery sherds, which inspires consideration of the possible form and function of the original artefact; an ancient civilisation pantheon card-game; hands-on examination of replica objects; and demonstration of knowledge acquired through the reading of an extract from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Year 8 students delve deeper into field archaeology, through practical activities that include identifying animal bones. Knowledge of the ancient pantheon is reinforced, and a more complex reading from the Book of the Dead helps expand the students' knowledge. Both year-levels are asked to consider thorny moral and ethical dilemmas involving cultural heritage, including debates on the repatriation of the Rosetta Stone and the Elgin Marbles.

The experience at school is followed by an optional full-day visit to Melbourne. The morning activities take place in the object-based learning laboratories in the University of



Year 8 students from Mooroopna Secondary College, Numurkah Secondary College and Kyabram Secondary College reconstructing pots from fragments at the National Gallery of Victoria.



Melbourne's Arts West building,<sup>7</sup> and the afternoon in the Ancient World galleries and workrooms of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) (pictured above). In the first year of the project, students visited the Hellenic Museum. All Year 7s are offered this opportunity, while school teachers select a small group of Year 8 students to join a combined school masterclass. In the 2017 visiting cohort, 74 per cent of Year 7 students had never before visited the NGV. Of the 26 per cent who had visited previously, only 20 per cent had attended in a private capacity; the others had been on a previous school excursion.

### The Classics and Archaeology Collection as inspiration

The Classics and Archaeology Collection, one of more than 30 cultural collections at the University of Melbourne, comprises approximately 25,000 objects and was originally established as a teaching collection.<sup>8</sup> Objects come from the ancient cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Cyprus, Greece and Rome. During the Goulburn Valley students' visit to Melbourne, four ancient Egyptian objects currently on display in the Arts West laboratories are used to stimulate discussion and discovery.

The first and second objects of focus in the object laboratory build on the activity already undertaken by the students at school. Students are presented with authentic ceramic sherds, and are asked to envisage the shape, size and use of a pot, based on only a single sherd and a pottery typology as a reference point. A Predynastic Period vessel, typical of the pots described as burnished black-topped red ware (pictured on page 51), tells the students much about grave goods and burial practices in Egypt more than 5,000 years ago. When the students are given the opportunity to work directly with the object, their excitement is palpable. They are astounded when they learn that the pot (which exhibits little wear) was made before the pyramids were constructed on the Giza plateau. The conversation provoked by an encounter with this Predynastic vessel includes consideration of the fabric and method of manufacture and decoration, the potential of the object for use in everyday life, the reason for its placement in a grave, and its intended use in the afterlife.

An Old Kingdom beer jar dated to the 4th dynasty (pictured opposite, above) exemplifies a vessel that has been reconstructed from fragments. During afternoon activities at the NGV, students are given the



Left: Jar with pointed base; Egypt, Old Kingdom, 4th–6th Dynasty, c. 2686–2160 BCE; ceramic, height 26.7 cm. 0000.0629, Flinders Petrie Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Below: Jar; Egypt, New Kingdom, c. 1550–1070 BCE; ceramic, with red-and-black painted decoration and linen-covered seal; height: 18.9 cm. 1968.0056, purchased from the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada, 1968, Middle Eastern Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

opportunity to reconstruct a broken pot. In the classification exercise undertaken during the school visits, students are encouraged to understand the reasons why wear is not always an indicator of age. Comparison between the Old Kingdom jar and the Predynastic Period vessel are authentic, practical examples of an older object presenting in much better condition than a piece made centuries later. This comparative analysis inspires discussion about identifying ritual objects and those used in everyday life. The beer jar also introduces the system of rations for pyramid workers on the Giza plateau, and the reason why many of the workers were employed as builders, away from their homes and primary agricultural work. Ancient Egyptian civilisation's reliance on the annual inundation of the Nile is a concept well understood by rural students, especially in the Goulburn Valley, where irrigation is the life-blood of many farming properties.

Mummification is another ancient Egyptian concept that is easily understood by students, whether or not they have already studied ancient civilisations. The third object of study in the laboratories is a New Kingdom ceramic jar with painted decoration and a linen seal (pictured right).

Students are asked to apply their observational skills, which provokes consideration of the reason for the linen seal and therefore the likely use of the object. What could be inside this vessel? The group explores the background to animal mummification, including the understanding that this pot was thought to have contained a mummified bird. An image produced by the CT scanning of the



pot reveals that it is empty, which leads to discussion of the research opportunities that have been created by advances in technology, aiding our understanding of the past.

Human mummification is explored through the lids of two limestone New Kingdom canopic jars (see page 54). Students are asked to consider the likely size of the corresponding jars, and are introduced to four depictions seen on the lids of a full set of New Kingdom jars. We explore the relationship between these objects and the Predynastic Period vessel, consider the natural process of mummification evidenced during Predynastic history and the reasons for the development of an artificial mummification ritual, and examine the process of mummification—including evisceration of the organs contained in the canopic jars.

### Conclusion

Our OBL project has many aims, but the ultimate intention is to improve these rural students' academic results and broaden their potential career paths and choices. When asked later to comment on their experience, students mention their enjoyment, express amazement at handling the objects, acknowledge how much they have learnt, and state

Lid for canopic jar, in the shape of the head of Imsety, guardian of the liver; Egypt, Thebes, New Kingdom, c. 1570–1070 BCE; limestone, 12.3 × 11.0 × 14.0 cm. 2009.0209, gift of David and Marion Adams 2009, University of Melbourne Art Collection.



For more information on the **Classics and Archaeology Collection**, which is managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art, see [vm.arts.unimelb.edu.au/classics/](http://vm.arts.unimelb.edu.au/classics/).

a desire to continue to take part in the program. Responses from students during the first two years demonstrate that intimacy with authentic and replica artefacts offers the potential to significantly increase learning retention. Close exposure to authentic objects inspires students who are rarely afforded such opportunities to consider the importance in their own lives of knowledge gleaned from ancient civilisations.

**Acknowledgements:** We acknowledge the following people and institutions for making the OBL project possible: University of Melbourne Engagement Grant Committee; University of

Melbourne Equity Innovation Grant Committee; Meredith Martin (associate director, cultural and public engagement); Fiona Moore and her team for assistance in the OBL labs; the Ian Potter Museum of Art; John Tatoulis and Sarah Craig of the Hellenic Museum; National Gallery of Victoria; Michele Stockley (senior educator), Johanna Petkov, Daniel Garcia and all participating members of the education team. In addition, we thank Annelies Van De Ven for her invaluable contribution to the Rural Secondary School Program.

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