

Preserving pathologies

Emily Robins

The Universitas 21 International Student Museums and Collections Award is a unique opportunity for a University of Birmingham Student to travel halfway around the world to undertake a placement in the museums and collections of the University of Melbourne. As a recent art history graduate with an interest in museum education, collections access and the intersections between art and science, I was thrilled to be awarded this position, and eagerly anticipated starting the four projects organised for me by Melbourne's Cultural Collections Unit.

I had always been curious about museums of medicine, anatomy and pathology, intrigued not only by the stories behind the objects but also the issues facing these types of collections in their quest to remain relevant in a world so reliant on newer technologies and other methods of teaching.

It was this curiosity that led me to request a project at the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, one of Australia's largest collections of human tissue specimens. This is an exceptional resource, generally only seen by students enrolled in anatomy or pathology courses.

On first impressions I was struck by how light, bright and open the

museum was—a million miles away from the dusty and somewhat 'cabinet of horrors' places I had visited in the past. Although some collection items might distress an unprepared visitor, all remains are treated with the utmost dignity and displayed in a sensitive and considerate way. Furthermore, the museum itself is attached to a designated teaching space that is always well populated and in use. Nothing about the Harry Brookes Allen Museum felt out of touch; it appeared to be a dynamic location for discovery and learning, remaining a relevant part of teaching in a constantly evolving discipline. The museum has embraced modern technologies and opportunities for collaboration with other fields, through a biomedical artist-in-residency program, for example.

My arrival coincided with the gearing up for the university's annual Open Day in August, marked with the unveiling of an ancient Egyptian mummy facial reconstruction project. As well as helping with this project, I was to assist with curating and writing labels for a complementary display charting the history of methods used to preserve human remains in museum and educational contexts. These include air-drying, preservation in a formaldehyde solution (known as formalin),



corrosion casting (where a fluid resin is injected into an organ before the flesh is melted away, leaving behind a rather beautiful cast of the vessels), and more recent approaches such as plastination, digital interfaces, three-dimensional printing and virtual reality.

Opposite: Emily Robins working with a cast in the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology. Photograph by Ryan Jefferies.

Below: J. Carney, Corrosion cast of the kidney, 1968. 516-500011, Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, University of Melbourne.

At first, I was daunted by the prospect of creating these labels, as I had little experience or first-hand knowledge of this type of collection and the processes I would be describing. However, I found that my arts background was not the disadvantage I had thought it would be; in fact, it worked to my benefit! Using the skills I had honed over the past three years, of understanding, interpreting and summarising difficult seminar texts, I was able to view the objects on display through a different lens. This enabled me to create labels that were succinct, scientifically factual and also interesting to read. I thoroughly enjoyed this project and felt privileged to explore a collection that is not normally open to the public.

To supplement the projects I undertook as part of my placement, I was keen to see some of the university's other cultural collections, including the Medical History Museum, the Herbarium, and the Tiegs Museum of Zoology. Despite the scientific nature and high research value of these collections, they didn't feel unapproachable to an arts student. Throughout my time in Melbourne I was struck by the easy accessibility, the interdisciplinary approach taken by the collections staff, and the integration of museum



holdings into university teaching. It was a stand-out experience for me and something I would love to see developed across all university collections.

Emily Robins is a graduate of the University of Birmingham, where she studied art history and specialised in pacifist propaganda images of World War I. After volunteering in museums and galleries across the campus and city, she hopes to pursue a career in museum education.

The Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology is generally open to the public on University Open Day; see <http://harrybrookesallenmuseum.mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/>.

For more information on the **Universitas 21 International Student Museums and Collections Award**, see http://library.unimelb.edu.au/museumsandcollections/teaching_and_learning/fellowships_and_awards/birmingham_international_exchange_program.