

The Museums and Collections Award 2013

Chloë Lund

In August 2013, I was the UK recipient of the Museums and Collections Award—a cultural exchange between the University of Birmingham and the University of Melbourne that was born out of the Universitas 21 network. The award enabled me to visit the University of Melbourne for four weeks, in order to explore its cultural collections and learn about the ways that they are used and managed. The exchange is intended to benefit the participant by giving them a unique opportunity for personal and professional development, but it also functions as a significant gesture to strengthen the connection between the two universities.

There are clear parallels between Birmingham's and Melbourne's cultural collections. Both include holdings that were initially acquired as teaching aids but today are primarily valued as cultural objects (for example, the anatomical models and specimens in their medical history museums), as well as those that are still important resources for research (for example, Birmingham's Lapworth Museum of Geology or Melbourne's herbarium). Some, such as the historic photographs, documents and publications kept in their archives, record the universities' heritage, while others, such as the

fine art collections, represent the institutions' status as cultural custodians.

Despite these similarities, and the resulting sense of familiarity that I experienced during the exchange, my time in Melbourne was marked by new experiences. I worked on four main projects during my placement, all of which built on my previous interests but also offered fresh perspectives and ideas, and developed new skills.

The first of these was with the Cultural Collections Unit, which appealed to my interest in cultural

engagement. My task was to develop an outreach activity that could be used to introduce the collections to new and prospective students. The proposed activity would be based around artistic responses to the collections. This approach reflected research and conversations that I had with people in Melbourne and also drew on the success of projects at the University of Birmingham with our artists-in-residence program.

My work with the Baillieu Library Print Collection allowed me to revisit my academic passion for art history, as I was writing narratives for three of the prints that feature in the touring exhibition *Radicals, slayers and villains*. The task of picking out the most interesting and accessible elements of my research, and condensing them into a 250-word catalogue entry for each print, proved to be an enjoyable challenge.

At the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation I learnt a range of completely new skills and knowledge that will serve me well in any future collections work. I was particularly thrilled to get some hands-on experience in a number of conservation techniques. These included working on a set of discoloured prints: carefully cleaning, washing, and even applying bleach in a bid to reduce unsightly stains.



Previous page: Model of a foetus, made by Friedrich Ziegler, Freiburg, Germany, late 19th century, wax and wood. Reg. no. BIRRC-M0085, University of Birmingham Medical School Collection.

Right: Model of hemi-head, showing the course of cranial nerves, made by Tramond, Paris, c. 1890, wax, cloth and wood, 24.0 × 40.0 × 26.0 cm. Reg. no. 516 500238, Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, University of Melbourne.

Below: Chloë Lund in the Baillieu Library, with an engraving by William Hogarth. Photograph by Kerriane Stone.



Finally, at the Ian Potter Museum of Art I was inspired by the way staff have recognised the potential locked within the university's art collections for a broad range of purposes and audiences. As well as communicating with the general community through its public-facing museum, the Potter is strengthening its relationships with departments in the university, and runs imaginative academic programs. My favourite of these invited students of medicine to advance their essential skills of visual analysis, by using art to develop an understanding of the tricks and tools of perception.¹

In addition to completing these formal projects, I was able to visit other collections on campus and

talk to staff who work with them. I observed how the university's collections function as a kind of watering hole around which students, academics and members of the public gather to quench their cultural thirst. My experiences in both Melbourne and Birmingham have shown me that collections thrive in such a position by encouraging conversation and collaboration between people of different backgrounds, interests and skills, thus maximising the collections' value and reach. Through the Museums and Collections Award, the University of Birmingham is invited to the watering hole, thus extending this community across the globe and offering a chance for the

two institutions to share knowledge and ideas. It was a joy and a privilege to have played a part in this. I was excited to have the chance to tell people in Melbourne about some of the work that my own university does with its collections, and at the same time I learnt a number of things that have been of interest to my friends and colleagues in Birmingham. In addition, I was able to make my own valuable connections with members of staff at the University of Melbourne, as well as with previous recipients of the award.

I am confident that the things I learnt and the connections made during my placement in Melbourne will continue to serve me well in the future, and I will always remember my time in the city fondly.

Chloë Lund graduated from the University of Birmingham in June 2013 with first-class honours in the history of art. She is currently employed by the University of Birmingham in the Research and Cultural Collections Department.

For more information on the **Museums and Collections Award**, see www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/projects/international/.

¹ For more on this program see Heather Gaunt, 'Medicine and the arts', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 11, December 2012, pp. 37–9.

