

# The Grimwades' Miegunyah

## An architectural palimpsest

Katja Wagner

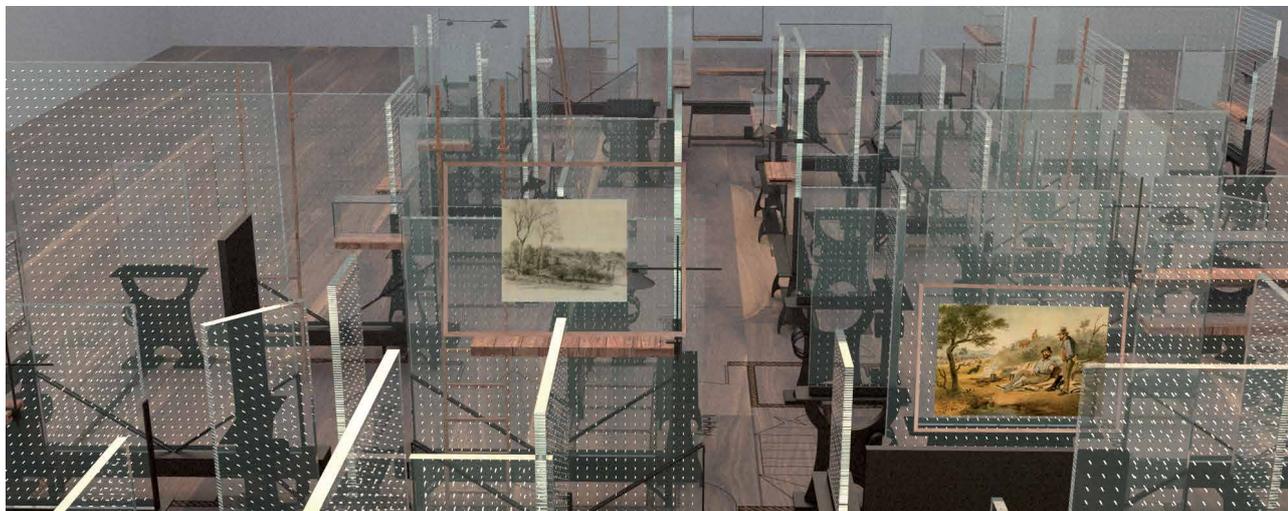
The year 1987 was a crucial one in the life of the Russell and Mab Grimwade 'Miegunyah' Collection. It marked the formal divergence of the intertwined histories of the Miegunyah property at 641 Orrong Road, Toorak, and the collection of artworks, decorative objects, furniture, books, botanical specimens, historical documents, photographs and woodworking tools that it had housed.

Sir Russell (1879–1955) and Lady (Mabel) Grimwade (1887–1973) had bequeathed the property to the University of Melbourne. Russell expressed the hope that:

it shall go to Melbourne University, together with its contents ... in the hope that this house at least, may remain in order that future generations of Australians may have some idea of the manner in which their predecessors lived ... I have expressed a wish that the main rooms should be maintained as they were in my lifetime ... [and] that a building be erected in the grounds to house the University Press.<sup>1</sup>

The university's decision to sell Miegunyah was made after painstaking consideration, and has since enabled the funding of an expanded Grimwade vision.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, I became intrigued by the enduring influence of Miegunyah on the collection that continues to bear its name—the ethereal amber surrounding the specimens that today are such treasured members of the university's cultural collections.<sup>3</sup> In concert with research into museological contextualism, influential collector spaces, and architectural forays into place, time and the object, as a student of architecture in receipt of one of the six Ian Potter Museum of Art Miegunyah Student Awards for 2018 I embarked on an adventure into the Grimwades' Miegunyah, and sketched a spatial means of incorporating 'the void ... back into itself' (see below).<sup>4</sup>

It is revealing to consider the history of the house and property Miegunyah alongside that of Russell and Mab Grimwade's collection of largely colonial art, texts, specimens and Australiana. They have a symbiotic

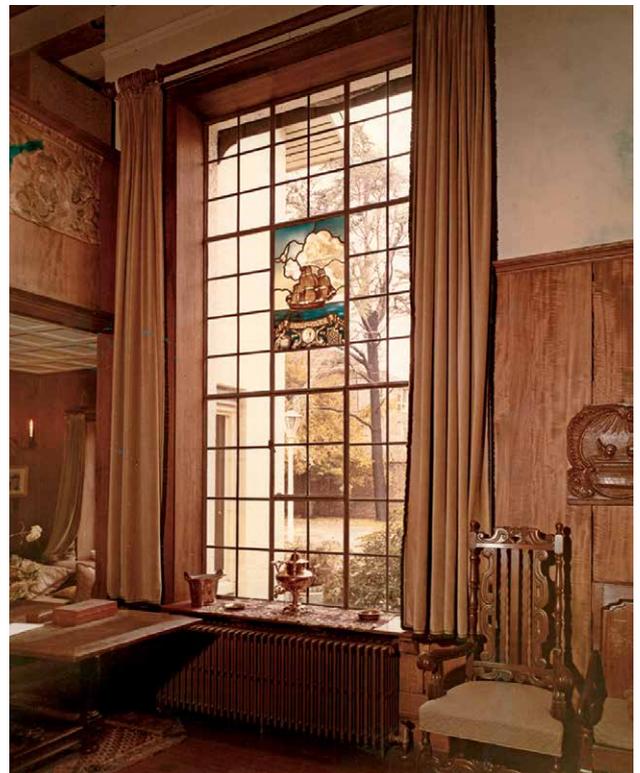


Opposite: Katja Wagner, *Miegunyah scheme oblique view from above*, 2018, digital render and collage.

Below: Andrew Grimwade, *The Endeavour* stained-glass window, designed by Daryl Lindsay, photographic print. Box 35, 1997.0095, papers of Sir Andrew Sheppard Grimwade, University of Melbourne Archives. Reproduced courtesy of Sir Andrew Grimwade.

relationship beyond that of simply container and contents, and were developed in parallel over the first half of the 20th century. Two further architectural elements of Grimwade Australiana of this period are Westerfield and Cook's Cottage. The former was Mab and Russell's country house near Frankston, designed by Harold Desbrowe Annear in 1924, and the latter a small cottage connected with Captain James Cook, imported from Yorkshire by Russell Grimwade and reconstructed in Fitzroy Gardens for Melbourne's centennial celebrations of 1934.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Miegunyah, Westerfield and Cook's Cottage could each be seen as literal applications of Russell Grimwade's perception of an historic colonial identity in material form. Symbolically, they read as relics of an apocryphal Australia in the wake of Federation and the Great War.<sup>6</sup>

Miegunyah (pictured on page 51) has its roots in the gold rush era of the 1850s, when it received its name, which means 'my home' in a local Indigenous language.<sup>7</sup> Russell Grimwade described the founding of the building with characteristic flourish, speaking of its growth from the ballast of ships transporting cargo between the gold rush epicentres of California and Victoria.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, when Miegunyah was established by merchant and pastoralist John Goodman in 1853, the house was a freestanding masonry colonial structure of modest scale and significance, a state in which it remained until purchased by Russell as a wedding gift for his bride, Mabel Kelly, in 1910, from which point it underwent a succession of modifications over five decades.<sup>9</sup> The most significant phase of building works occurred in 1920–21, when the house achieved what Professor Emeritus Miles Lewis determines was its general present form, in the Arts and Crafts vernacular of Westerfield's designer, Desbrowe Annear. Internally this is marked by a monumental



chamfered fireplace anchoring a panelled, double-height medieval hall (see page 50). In 1933–34 further works were carried out by Stephenson & Meldrum, with a series of minor alterations in 1945 by A. & H. Peck, and in 1956 by Grounds, Romberg & Boyd.<sup>10</sup> A tenebrous leadlight window portraying Cook's ship *Endeavour*, designed by Daryl Lindsay,<sup>11</sup> is also integral to the building fabric (pictured above).<sup>12</sup>

The garden at Miegunyah was also the product of the Grimwades' labour and imagination. A canvas for the expression of their horticultural interests and

Andrew Grimwade, The panelled hall at Miegunyah,  
photographic print. Box 35, 1997.0095, papers of Sir Andrew  
Sheppard Grimwade, University of Melbourne Archives.  
Reproduced courtesy of Sir Andrew Grimwade.





Left: Russell Grimwade, Miegunyah, Orrong Road, Toorak, Victoria, October 1933, black-and-white photographic print, 8 × 12 cm. 2002.0003.0656, Sir Russell Grimwade Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

Below: Russell Grimwade, Workshop at Miegunyah, 31 January 1921, black-and-white photographic print, 7.7 × 10.0 cm. 2002.0003.0638, papers of Sir Wilfred Russell Grimwade, University of Melbourne Archives.

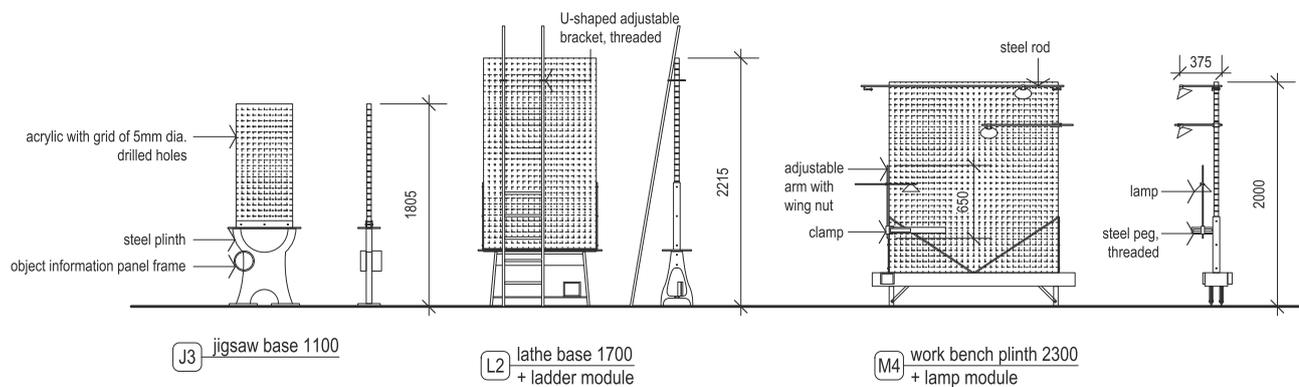
expertise, it incorporated a series of Australian Arts and Crafts-style sunken ‘rooms’, a pond, English vernacular masonry and Italianate elements (believed to have had input from landscape architects Edna Walling and Ellis Stones, E.F. Cook and later John Stevens), in addition to a productive kitchen garden, rose beds and a carefully maintained eucalypt arboretum.<sup>13</sup> It was in this setting that Russell Grimwade’s garage and workshop were located. The workshop (see below, right) was one of the first points of attention for building works, converted in 1911–12, and subsequently redesigned by Philip Hudson in 1923 after a fire.<sup>14</sup> It was the principal theatre in which the full intensity and diversity of Russell Grimwade’s skills and interests in carpentry, metalwork, automobile technology, photography and chemical sciences played out, among a network of cables, shafts, tools, dials and instruments.<sup>15</sup> Russell Grimwade was an inheritor of the cultural and industrial entrepreneurialism of early Melbourne through his father, Frederick Sheppard Grimwade, and Frederick’s business partner, Alfred Felton.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, as my research progressed it became increasingly evident to me that the Miegunyah workshop was more than a maker’s space; it was synonymous with Russell Grimwade.

I began my investigations into architectural and museological contextualism through a study of house museums, starting with the quintessential example of Sir John Soane’s Museum in London. Among other parallels, Soane’s intent for his museum to be used for educational purposes shares a likeness with Grimwade’s vision for Miegunyah as the setting for what he evocatively imagined as ‘an antipodean Clarendon Press’.<sup>17</sup> The importance of the house for the collection was underlined in October 1997, when Grimwade intern Laurelee MacMahon curated a display of Miegunyah objects in situ for a Wesley College Open Garden Day.

Poignantly, *The University of Melbourne Fine Arts Society Bulletin* published an article headlined ‘The Grimwade Collection makes an excursion home’, Benjamin Thomas later noting the value of ‘seeing the works in their original context, to be understood within the original domestic setting of the Grimwades’.<sup>18</sup>

At this point of my explorations, the interdependence between Miegunyah the place and Miegunyah the collection seemed formidable. By way of contrast, the newly renovated Giacometti Institute in Paris, where the sculptures, drawings, paintings and studio contents of Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) are ‘reimagined’ in the Art Nouveau residence of designer Paul Follet (1877–1941), encouraged me to consider the period interior as an instructive museum environment.<sup>19</sup> I considered using the 1888 Building on campus facing Grattan Street for its resonance with the Miegunyah story through its Arts and Crafts interiors and leadlight commemorations of Australian patriotism, but then rejected the idea for a more contemporary interpretive approach.





It was at the Johnston Collection, a Soanian house museum in East Melbourne which opened to the public in the same decade in which Miegunyah became a University of Melbourne property,<sup>20</sup> that I began to recognise the complexity of the house-object interrelationship. The qualities of historical authenticity and personal character for which a house museum is most admired belie what Mónica Risnicoff de Gorgas deems a ‘dream space’—an environment defined more by ‘poetics’ than by historical veracity.<sup>21</sup> At the Johnston Collection my guide informed me that the house had been completely transformed since antiques dealer William Johnston (1911–1986) had lived there, the kitchen repurposed and then reconstructed, undergoing constant metamorphosis alongside current programs. I started to question the purpose of the historic interior.

Contextualisation, decontextualisation and stylistic historicism are also points of architectural contention. I turned to the museum projects of Israeli-American architect Daniel Libeskind. The work of Libeskind, in addition to that of Peter Zumthor and Carlo Scarpa, reminded me of recapturing salient historical messages and meanings through the contemporary idiom. Libeskind’s Jewish Museum Berlin (completed 2001) and Felix Nussbaum Haus in Osnabrück (completed 1998 in memory of this artist who was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944) powerfully confront the fractured pieces of German-Jewish history, crafting an architectural space around a void, a violent absence.<sup>22</sup> Libeskind commented on the poetics of displacement and memory in architecture:

The task of building a Jewish Museum in Berlin demands more than a mere functional response to the programme. Such a task in all its ethical depth requires the incorporation of the void of Berlin back into itself,

in order to disclose how the past continues to affect the present and to reveal how a hopeful horizon can be opened through the aporias of time.<sup>23</sup>

He also wrote:

The Jewish Museum is conceived as an emblem in which the Invisible and the Visible are the structural features which have been gathered in this space of Berlin and laid bare in an architecture where the unnamed remains the name which keeps still.<sup>24</sup>

In a contrasting tone, Swiss architect Peter Zumthor’s work, such as at the Kolumba Museum in Cologne (the museum of that city’s Catholic archdiocese, completed 2007), moulds contemplative space to portray time with tacit understanding and archaeological sensitivity.<sup>25</sup> It was also through Zumthor’s work that I was reminded of Grimwade the craftsman, student of the eucalypt and the timber joint. Italian architect Carlo Scarpa’s exhibition design and architectural museum interventions are implicitly steeped in historical-cultural context. But it was not so much the drama of Scarpa’s reductive theatricality, as his use of physical mechanisms, such as complex manual door and window operations, as a vehicle for poetic engagement with the visitor, that resonates with Grimwade.<sup>26</sup> Scarpa’s understanding of history is not laborious and apologetic, but revealing of history as a living fabric. Similarly, in the words of his biographer, John Poynter, Grimwade was ‘a man who valued both past and future, and saw the need to balance the demands of both while sacrificing neither to the other’.<sup>27</sup>

Traditional Japanese and Scarpa-esque architectural devices of the tatami module, shoji screen, poetry of thresholds, and dialogue with history as reciprocal culture rather than as a static past led me back to Grimwade’s



Opposite: Katja Wagner, *Miegunyah scheme plinth and display mechanism modules*, 2018, CAD technical drawing.

Left: Katja Wagner, *Miegunyah scheme, perspective into spatial void*, 2018, digital render and collage.

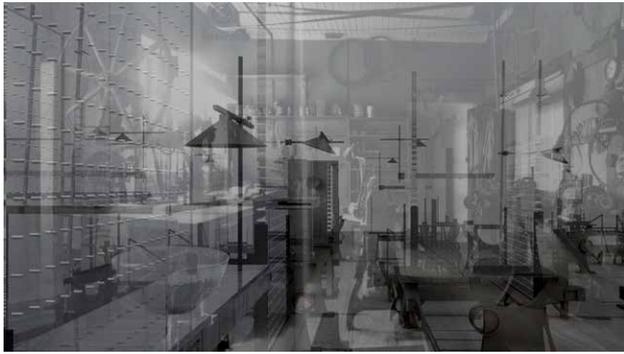
scientific concern for classification, rationalisation, manufacture and the machine. To relocate Cook's Cottage from Yorkshire to Melbourne, each element was numbered, dismantled, crated and reconstructed. Grimwade's collections are also redolent of an ordering energy, like the gumnut specimens in his eucalypt cabinet.

Hence, in my spatial response, to renew the interface between the Miegunyah house and collection, I moved away from reconstructing the period interior and turned instead to the 18th-century *Kunst und Wunderkammer* or 'curiosity cabinet' mode of display, adopting the language of Russell Grimwade's workshop as the architectural vernacular. Arranged according to the house's ground-floor plan after 1934, stylised translations of machinery supports serve as plinths for objects (see examples opposite). This approach reflected the cohabitation of enigmatic Australian nation-building legend and analytical rigour which struck me as an indelible theme of the collection. Grimwade lived in a perpetual dialogue between the real and the fictional: the duality of his work as a chemical entrepreneur and businessman, and his fascination with the mythology of Australian identity, believing that 'In no other country [...] does the responsibility of preserving a knowledge of the past rest quite so heavily upon its people'.<sup>28</sup> The pedestals follow the form—but omit the purpose—of workbench, jigsaw and lathe-stand, just as Grimwade's understanding of 'Australiana' included the adventures of explorers and the narrative of colonial development, while often omitting the violence of colonial conquest and expansion inflicted upon the First Australians.

This structure of display also facilitates the motifs of exploration inherent in the *Wunderkammer* mode, furthered by a series of modular components recalling elements of the Miegunyah workshop. These include ledges or vitrines containing objects, timber observation

ladders, adjustable lamps synthesising workshop task lighting, adjustable laboratory burette stands, and timber observation ladders. Upright planes based on the perforated, wall-mounted chipboard panels used to store tools are slotted with pegs to secure framed works of art, documents and textual material (see above). Being clear acrylic, these planes also enable a De Stijl or Miesian reading of diaphanous space as a limitless medium for the momentary suspension of objects held in examination, while further building upon motifs of adjustability and analysis by nature of their flexibility as a system. At a distance, the white translucency of the perforated planes billowing above blackened bases recalls the forms of ships—perhaps the First Fleet, or Cook's *Endeavour*. The articulated nature of the stands as independent, designed objects also contributes to the blurring of lines between public museum and private house, if this distinction is defined as objects being analytically separated from—rather than placed directly upon—surfaces, as Andrew McClellan suggests.<sup>29</sup> The use of hand-written object information panels resembling taxonomic labels in the form of a machinery component or workbench vice further contributes to this interplay, reminding the visitor of the hand of the collector and the personal nature of the art object.

Although the question of the enduring legacy of Russell and Mab Grimwade's house on the Miegunyah Collection is a complex one, the Grimwades' vision for the house as the lasting repository and name for their personal collection renders it all the more worthy of scholarly attention. Drawing upon the workshop as the formal language, and the house as planning device, reasserts Miegunyah as a symbol of Russell Grimwade's fields of endeavour and exploratory impetus, while acknowledging the house museum as an agent of identity construction. In future it would valuable to also



Left: Katja Wagner, *Miegunyah* scheme perspective overlaid with *Miegunyah* workshop photograph, 2018, digital render and collage.

consider the role of Mab Grimwade, in addition to the garden landscape, as equally dynamic forces that defined the collection. Nevertheless I hope to have rekindled a curatorial dialogue with the Grimwades' home, Miegunyah, as the medium that binds together the Russell and Mab Grimwade 'Miegunyah' Collection.

Katja Wagner is undertaking a Master of Architecture degree at the University of Melbourne. She was a recipient of an Ian Potter Museum of Art Miegunyah Student Award in 2018.

The Russell and Mab Grimwade 'Miegunyah' Collection is part of the University of Melbourne Art Collection, which is managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art on the Parkville campus. For opening hours and other information, see [www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au). Various Grimwade family papers are available for research through **University of Melbourne Archives** (<https://archives.unimelb.edu.au/>), while Sir Russell's book collection, mostly works on the history and exploration of Australia, are in **Special Collections** in the Baillieu Library (<https://library.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special-collections>).

- 1 Russell Grimwade, letter to Douglas Veale, 1952, quoted in John Poynter and Benjamin Thomas, *Miegunyah: The bequests of Russell and Mab Grimwade*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2015, p. 77.
- 2 University of Melbourne Museum of Art, *Works of art from the Russell and Mab Grimwade bequest: The University of Melbourne Art Collection* (exhibition catalogue), Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 1989, p. iii.
- 3 The artworks, furniture and decorative arts were deposited in the University Gallery (now the Ian Potter Museum of Art), photographs and documents in the University of Melbourne Archives, books in the Baillieu Library (University of Melbourne) and items from the Miegunyah workshop in Museum Victoria (University Museum of Art, *Works of art from the Russell and Mab Grimwade bequest*, p. iv; Rachel Kent and Elizabeth Aders, *Art, industry and science: The Grimwade legacy: Works of art from the Russell and Mab Grimwade bequest*, University of Melbourne Museum of Art, 1997, p. iii).
- 4 Bernhard Schneider, *Daniel Libeskind: Jewish Museum Berlin, Berlin*, Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2004, p. 19.
- 5 Heritage Council Victoria, 'Miegunyah House', *Victorian Heritage Database*, <https://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/30675/download-report>; Lisa Sullivan, *A collection and a cottage: Selected works from the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, the University of Melbourne* (exhibition brochure), Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2000, pp. 10–11.
- 6 Poynter and Thomas, *Miegunyah*, p. 139.
- 7 Poynter and Thomas, *Miegunyah*, pp. v–vi.
- 8 Poynter and Thomas, *Miegunyah*, p. 101.
- 9 Kent and Aders, *Art, industry and science*, p. i; Miles Lewis, *'Miegunyah' 641 Orrong Road, Toorak*, Melbourne: Miles Lewis, 1986, pp. 13–16.
- 10 Lewis, *'Miegunyah'*, pp. 9–13; Heritage Council Victoria, 'Miegunyah House'.
- 11 Poynter and Thomas, *Miegunyah*, p. 173.
- 12 Kent and Aders, *Art, industry and science*, p. 11.
- 13 Poynter and Thomas, *Miegunyah*, pp. 108–19; Laurelee MacMahon, 'The Grimwade Collection makes an excursion home', *University of Melbourne Fine Arts Society Bulletin*, vol. 9, no. 3, Spring 1997, p. 5.
- 14 Lewis, *'Miegunyah'*, p. 8.
- 15 Poynter and Thomas, *Miegunyah*, p. 121; University Gallery, *The Grimwade Collection: A selection of works from the bequest of Sir Russell and Lady Grimwade: University Gallery, the University of Melbourne 22 July – 4 September 1987* (exhibition catalogue), University Gallery, University of Melbourne, 1987, p. 5.
- 16 University Gallery, *The Grimwade Collection*, pp. 3–5; Heritage Council Victoria, 'Miegunyah House'.
- 17 John Summerson, 'The Soane Museum, 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields', in *John Soane*, London: Academy Editions, 1983, p. 25; Poynter and Thomas, *Miegunyah*, pp. 76–7.
- 18 Poynter and Thomas, *Miegunyah*, p. 173.
- 19 Betty Wood, 'Alberto Giacometti's studio comes to life in Paris', *The Spaces*, 3 July 2018, <https://thespaces.com/alberto-giacomettis-studio-comes-to-life-in-paris/>.
- 20 The Johnston Collection, *History*, [www.johnstoncollection.org/history](http://www.johnstoncollection.org/history).
- 21 Mónica Risnicoff de Gorgas, 'Reality as an illusion: The historic houses that became museums', in Bettina Messias Carbonell (ed.), *Museum studies: An anthology of contexts*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 360.
- 22 Schneider, *Daniel Libeskind*, pp. 26, 48.
- 23 Daniel Libeskind, quoted in Schneider, *Daniel Libeskind*, p. 19.
- 24 Daniel Libeskind, quoted in Schneider, *Daniel Libeskind*, p. 6.
- 25 Peter Zumthor, *Peter Zumthor works: Buildings and projects 1979–1997*, Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 1998, p. 286.
- 26 Henry Plummer, *The experience of architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2016, p. 105.
- 27 University Gallery, *The Grimwade Collection*, p. 5.
- 28 University Gallery, *The Grimwade Collection*, p. 3.
- 29 Andrew McClellan, 'Collecting, classification and display', in *The art museum from Boullée to Bilbao*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008, p. 137.