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The Art of Adornment: Another Jewel in the Crown of the Hellenic Museum

The Hellenic Museum has had a steady rise in publicity since its founding as a focal point of Greek history and Culture in Melbourne by Spiros Stamoulis in 2007.¹ The Greek diaspora of Melbourne is one of the largest outside of Greece, and through the industrial and cultural enterprises of its members, it has helped Melbourne thrive.² The Hellenic Museum is a model example of this success, growing from a small single-focus exhibit, to an award-winning museum housing a variety of topical exhibitions and a series of cultural events.³ Breaking out of the traditional history museum mould, it has hosted Greek food events, movies, plays, discussion groups, fashion expos and photography exhibitions. All this alongside the maintenance of their primary collection *Gods, Myths & Mortals: Greek Treasures across the Millennia*, a ten-year loan of 200 objects from the Benaki Museum in Athens.

The museum was established within the administrative quarters of the former Royal Mint on Williams Street, a Greek-revivalist style building dating back to the 1870s. Walking into the columned entrance hall, flanked with casts of famous Greek statues, you do get a sense that you are in a very different world from the hustle and bustle of modern Melbourne life. Just beyond the front desk on the left is the first exhibition space where the primary collection is held. Though housed

1 Hellenic Museum 2016a.

2 Tziovas 2013, 271–2.

3 On 6 August 2015, the Hellenic Museum won the Victorian Museum Award (Skoufatoglou 2015, 19 August).

in quite a small space, the curatorial team manage to artificially expand the exhibition by making the visitor weave through a series of subdivided spaces, moving chronologically from pre-historic votive figurines, classical terracotta statuettes and early Christian icons, to Ottoman-era textiles, Greek



Figure 1: Façade of the Old Mint (Hellenic Museum)

traditional dress and independence era documents. Another way in which they maximise the space to their advantage is by making use of the original wooden vault of the Mint. Here they have chosen to exhibit a number of precious silver objects that point to the traditions of the Greek Orthodox Church.

Another Hellenic Museum exhibition that has been an incredible success is photographer Bill Henson's ONEIROI. Henson's photos feature pieces held within the Benaki loan: a gold myrtle wreath, a gold kylix with repoussé leaping dogs, gold Eros earrings, a gold sword pommel, and a choker with silver coin pendants. The intention was to create an exhibit that brought the ancient past and the contemporary art world together, highlighting the potency of art and artefacts to speak to audiences across the ages.⁴ This is achieved not only through the tailor-made photographic works, but also their display.⁵ The blue walls of the exhibition room mirror the backgrounds of the photos, offset by the golden hues of the frames and figures. In their current display setting, the pictures seem to emanate their own light, emerging from their deep blue surroundings, an effect co-created by curator Sarah Craig who helped organise special lighting for the installation.

4 McDonald 2016, 1 April.

5 For an explanation of how Bill Henson created his photographs and what his influences were see Hellenic Museum 2016b.



Figure 2: Henson photo of Girl with a gold kylix (Hellenic Museum)

Besides the effort put into the design of the display, the museum staff have also attempted to engage the audience directly, particularly within the *Gods, Myths & Mortals* exhibit. This is especially important in small museums with limited resources, who struggle to leave a lasting impression on their visitors. Tours give the collection a personal touch for guests, allowing them to

connect to the museum's narratives through the guide as a medium. However, these need to be pre-booked, and the majority of visitors are more spontaneous in their outings. The QR-code self-guided tour provides a casual alternative, allowing visitors to move through the collection at their own pace and receive extra information about key items using an app downloadable on the museum Wi-Fi through any smart phone. Children enjoy their own scavenger hunt style game, with the *Escape the Labyrinth* guide. These activities help enhance the richness and diversity of the Hellenic Museum's relatively small collection.



Figure 3: Gold kylix with leaping dogs repoussé (Hellenic Museum).

In addition to the *Gods, Myths & Mortals* exhibit, in 2016 the Hellenic Museum acquired another loan from the Benaki Museum entitled *The Art of Adornment: Greek Jewellery of the 17th to 19th Centuries*, further consolidating

the relationship between the two institutions. As with the previous exhibition, curators and conservators from the Benaki Museum ensured the collection's transportation and installation in collaboration with Melbourne's own curator Sarah Craig and conservator Gabrielle Fanning. The exhibition that ran from 26 August 2016 to 29 January 2017 was located on the upper floor of the Hellenic Museum, across from the Bill Henson photo exhibit. It consists of roughly ninety pieces of Greek jewellery spanning roughly 300 years of Greek history and was described by Benaki Museum CEO Olivier Descotes as a 'resume of the story of Greece over three centuries'.⁶

The exhibition space was quite small, only comprising a single room. It was also quite traditional in its layout, containing a general introductory back-lit text panel and seven wall-cases all of uniform size to represent the six geographical regions that the jewellery hails from—the Greek islands, Asia Minor, Central Greece, Thessaly, Epirus, Northern Greece, Macedonia and Thrace—and the jewellery worn by men. Despite its small size the museum curators managed to communicate a great deal of information. Under each display case was a length of wall text with contextual information about the jewellery's origin. Within each case were labels providing additional information for each piece on display. This included exact dates and locations for the pieces, as well as an indication of how they would have been worn and what foreign influences fed into their design. The visitor was further aided by an image of people from the region wearing similar jewellery to that exemplified by the artefacts in the case.

According to the exhibition blurb *The Art of Adornment* was about 'more than just wearing jewellery'; it was also an example of the extreme detail that such aesthetic works require. Each piece displayed a high degree of craftsmanship, and the great artisanal skills of local workers. The labour visible in each piece pointed to the value that these objects must have had, and the level of investment that they would have necessitated from the purchaser.

6 Descotes 2016, 29:56.



Figure 4: 19th Century Necklace (Hellenic Museum).

Beyond this, the exhibition carried the ability to inform us about the social and cultural context of the Benaki's post-Byzantine collection, highlighting the additional meanings that jewellery can convey within their particular contexts.⁷ Many of the pieces came from a marital context and could have been used as apotropaic objects, good luck charms, status symbols,

or fertility enhancers. By bringing in these overarching themes, the museum managed to highlight both the regional variation between the jewellery styles and the common cultural motifs that are present throughout the collection.

While the exhibition focused quite heavily on jewellery worn by Greek women, there was some diversity within the collection. Amulets for example served as ornate protectors for people of all ages and genders, with specific icons and themes representing different phases of one's life. One of the examples in the exhibition was an amulet that would have been part of the traditional dress for young Greek boys. The image of St George slaying a dragon here was meant to evoke the protection from evil that god bestows upon the pious.

The exhibition was launched in connection to Melbourne Spring Fashion week, continuing the Hellenic Museum's trend of blending the historical and modern cultures of Greece. This connection to fashion reminded me of previous Hellenic Museum exhibition *Unclasped*, curated by Sarah Craig for Autumn Fashion Week just a few months before. While also allocated



Figure 5: 19th Century Amulet (Hellenic Museum).

⁷ Hellenic Museum 2016c.

a single room, this exhibition was much more innovative in its installation than *The Art of Adornment*, and its pieces were more challenging aesthetically than the bejewelled precious metals of the Benaki collection. It is a shame that they could not be displayed simultaneously, as the juxtaposition of the two jewellery displays would have further demonstrated the interesting relationship between old and new in Greek artistic and cultural expressions. This would also have fit in well with the Hellenic Museum's wider aim of celebrating the continuing accomplishments of Greek communities past and present.

The Hellenic Museum has become an amazing resource for Melbourne. Engaging with the wider community through its impeccably curated exhibits, its calendar of socio-cultural events and its educational efforts, this museum has become a signpost for the continuing relevance of cultural institutions. The museum not only represents a particular culture, the Greek people and their history, but also Melbourne as a multicultural city, one that is extremely open, allowing diverse cultures to preserve a sense of pride in their own identities, while forming part of a greater whole.

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