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## **Object Matters Episode 1 The Venetian Queen of Cyprus**

Presented by Dr Craig Barker  
Podcast transcription

Hello, my name is Craig Barker, and welcome to the Chau Chak Wing museum podcast ‘Object Matters’. In my role at the museum as Manager of Education and Public Programs, I would like to welcome you to the very first episode of what we plan to be a very long running series of discussions. Now, we've been planning and discussing this podcast for months, with the intention of launching the series at the opening of the Chau Chak Wing museum in late 2020 - a museum which brings together the University of Sydney's extensive collections of antiquities, natural history, Indigenous cultural history, scientific instruments, and visual arts, both historic and contemporary. And this podcast would have seen me interviewing my colleagues at the museum, academics from the University of Sydney and visiting researchers and guests, about objects and artworks and specimens from the Chau Chak Wing museum collection that meant something to them either from a scholarly perspective, or because they have a personal connection or interest, or sometimes just because the objects or the collections have an absolutely cracking yarn associated with them.

Now, of course, like the rest of the world, all of our plans have been turned upside down because of the COVID-19 crisis. So whilst we all work from home, and like museums around the globe using the hashtag #museumsfromhome, we've decided to bring forward the podcast series. So the quality of the recording is not going to be quite as I planned and the interviews with guests have yet to take place - but the passion for our collection and our desire to share it with you will remain hopefully undiminished. So without further ado, I wish to kick off the series, episode one and talk about one of my personal favorite objects in the Chau Chak Wing museum.

Now, I'm a classical archaeologist by training and I run a field project in Cyprus. So of course, the expectation would be for me to choose one of our Cypriot vases, or perhaps one of the red-figure Greek vases from the Nicholson collection. But I wanted to do something a little bit different with this. And interestingly, the object that I've chosen does have a connection with Cyprus, the island where I've devoted more than two decades of my academic career to, but I've chosen an oil painting. And it's actually quite a remarkable one because it's actually one of the first artworks to come into the University of Sydney's collection. It has the inventory number UA1865.9, and it's a portrait of Queen Catherine or Catarina Cornaro, the one-time Queen of Cyprus who lived between 1454 and 1510. Now she was a Venetian, and she had a remarkable influence upon Cypress' history, as well as Venetian art history. She was and remains an important figure in Rennaissance politics, diplomacy and the arts, with a life story that quite easily could fill the plot of a novel or a TV drama. The painting itself is quite large, it's more than one meter high and more than 80 centimeters wide, and you can view it on our website sydney.edu.au/museums, and then on the "search the collection" module, enter in its inventory number UA1865.9.

The oil on canvas work is a three-quarter length portrait of the Venetian-born Queen. She stands facing the right, and she has her left hand extended, while her other hand points down. She's dressed in black, wearing a widow's gown, but also a coronet, and quite an elaborate necklace. For me, it's her eyes which I find most notable, however. A gaze of steely determination and a hint of ruthlessness can be seen in those sharp, intense eyes. There's also very much a sense of vulnerability and tragedy about the woman who was depicted here. On the left hand side of the portrait is a red curtain and it's been partially pulled back to reveal a vista. If you look past the classical column on the very right hand side, you'll see out to a seascape with vessels, and the city state of Venice in the background. Now this is very typical of Venetian portraits of the early 16th century, a reminder of Venice's economic and maritime prowess. What is interesting about this painting, however, is that there's also a Latin inscription beneath the column, which refers to Catarina as the Queen of Cyprus. The painting belongs to a series of portraits, which I'm going to talk about in more detail in a moment.

But first, I want to discuss my personal connection with the painting because interestingly, in many ways of all of the material in the Chau Chak Wing museum collection, it's the work which I was first acquainted with as an undergraduate. And interestingly, I never saw it hung on a wall of the art gallery, and I didn't see it displayed in the old Nicholson Museum, but rather, it was on loan to an academic office in the early 1990s, when I first discovered it. That academic, Professor Richard Green, would go on to be my PhD supervisor, and we've now been colleagues for many, many years, working in the excavations in Pathos in Cyprus. How he got it into his room, I've never actually asked him, but it was part of a program whereby works of art from the collection were loaned out to specific academics and researchers and administrators across the campus of the University of Sydney. So I first encountered the Queen in my early undergraduate career when I had a meeting with Professor Green in his office.

Now let me paint the picture. This was a room filled with books absolutely piled high. The idea of what a professor's office should look like, at least in my mind at the time. I remember, in what must have been one of my very first meetings in his office, while he ducked behind one of these massive piles of books to retrieve a telephone which had started to ring - and to this day, I have no idea where it was located, it was buried under so much paper and books! But I remember looking around the room and I noticed the eyes of the woman in this portrait. And this, of course, was Queen Catarina. Neither of us at the time realized that we would be spending so much time in Cyprus together, but I remember being drawn into this portrait because it was truly an extraordinary work. And it's kind of actually interesting that long before I ended up working at the museum, long before I ended working in Cyprus, Catarina was part of my story as a student, and later my work at the University of Sydney. So in some ways, she's become something of a personal talisman for me that she's part of my career, my journey through archaeology and museum work as well. In 2013, I was thrilled to include it in a Nicholson museum exhibition on Cyprus that I curated, so I did eventually get to see it publicly. I really, really love this portrait as I hope I will be able to explain in the coming minutes, but firstly, who was Catarina Cornaro?

 Well, Catarina was the last monarch of the Kingdom of Cyprus, and she reigned between 1474 and 1489 16 years. Her tragic reign saw the Mediterranean island transfer from the hands of the Lusignan dynasty, who had dominated the island since the crusades, to the Republic of Venice, one of the clearest signs of the mercantile nation state flexing its imperial muscle. Now, these significant events took place against the backdrop of interference from Venice's rival Genoa and the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the east. Despite the complex political intrigue, Catarina became a much-admired figure in contemporary European society. Still, separating the real Catarina from the romanticized version of her can be something of a challenge. She was born in 1454 into one of the most noble and influential families of Venice, it produced four Doges, the senior-most elected officials of the Republic. She grew up in a family palace in the Grand Canal, and among the family's many financial interests were rich sugar plantations on Cyprus. They developed close relations with the Lusignan family who had reigned over Cyprus since 1192. After a period of instability, James the Second became the King of Cyprus in 1468, and he chose Catarina as his wife. The marital bond was supported by Venice, commercial rights on the island were now going to be secured for their own interest. She was presented with a massive dowry of gold and silver coinage. She and James married by proxy at St. Mark's Cathedral in July 1468. She was only 14 years of age at the time, and she set sail for Cyprus in 1472, to finally meet her husband. She arrived and married James in person at the Cypriot harbor city of Famagusta. But James died a mere 10 months after the two had met in person, leaving the heavily pregnant Queen Consort to become Regent to her newborn son, James the Third.

Tragedy struck the young Queen again in August of 1474, when her son and the last legitimate heir to the Lusignan line died. The child's passing left her as Queen Regent, a role that she would hold for 16 years. Rumours of course spread that James the Second had been poisoned by the Queen's relatives. But thrust into a position of power and prestige through the title, Catarina was immediately the centre of various intrigues within the court. She survived conspiracies from within to overthrow her and pressures from Naples in the Papal States. But it was her hometown of Venice that exerted the greatest threat. Control of Cyprus would consolidate the Republic's influence over the entire Mediterranean. So they removed many of the Queen's trusted advisors and replaced them with counsellors influencing decision making. And whilst it's very easy to portray her as a victim of Venetian manipulation, for years she actually faced down considerable pressure from her home Republic to surrender the throne. But by 1489, it was too late. She finally relented to the Republic's exertions, mediated by her brother, to abdicate. Although she lost political power, she was still able to stage manage her image incredibly successfully. Contemporary accounts discuss how the citizens of Cyprus wept as she left the island. Interesting, of course, the reality was far more complex. Cyprus was locked into a feudal system which was retained by the Venetians, so for most Cypriots, life would not change with the Queen's exile and the collapse of the monarchy. But the pageantry of the fleet carrying the exiled Queen back home, was played as a brilliant piece of propaganda by both the doges and by the former Queen. Her disembarkation in Venice became a common scene of contemporary painting. Venice would itself dominate Cyprus for the next century, until the island finally fell into Ottoman hands in 1570 - coincidentally, the political backdrop for Shakespeare's play Othello.

On return to Italy, Catarina was granted for life the Fiefdom of Asolo, a town in the northern region of Italy. And under her control, it became a flourishing court for late Renaissance art and learning. Poets and painters such as genteel Bellini were welcomed. The reputation of the Queen's court soon spread far and wide. Now there's some debate amongst historians as to who actually really spent time in the court, leading one historian to describe it as the "mirage" of Asolo. Whatever the true nature of the court, the image of the cultivated Queen and exile was manipulated by Catarina. She became a standard figure of portraitures, and in later life and even in death, she had far greater control than she ever did during her reign.

In 1510, she died in Venice. The funeral was so large that they had to build bridges of boats to allow greater pedestrian movement. She was buried in the church of San Salvador near the Realto bridge, the Republican Queen. But her influence on art would only increase in death. She becomes a popular subject amongst the Venetian school of painters. Her story provided a popular allegory of devotion to the Republic and personal sacrifice for Venetian power and prestige. She became a legend, the Lady of the Renaissance, the woman who gave up a throne for Venice. She figured in works created by artists including Dürer, based probably on a lost Bellini, and by Titian. A possible portrait of her by Titian of 1542 hangs in the Uffizi.

So how did a portrait of the Queen end up in Sydney? Well, it was presented to the university by one of the founding figures of Sydney University, Sir Charles Nicholson, in 1865 - part of his original benefaction of artworks. How Nicholson acquired the painting, of course is not known. It can only be assumed that he obtained it when he was in Italy in 1857, acquiring antiquities for the museum that he wanted to establish at the university. It is likely a late 18th century copy based upon an earlier painting by Titian. Many variations of the Sydney portrait are known. Indeed in 2017 the Leventis Museum in Nicosia in Cyprus, held an exhibition titled "Secrets of the Royal Portrait", in which a portrait of the Queen held in a private collection in Cyprus was exhibited after undergoing extensive scientific analysis, which had actually confirmed it was of a 16th century date. The Nicosia painting belonged to a series of paintings created by Titian or by his workshop, and copies in subsequent decades titled "Catarina Cornaro as a widow". Digital images of many other portraits from around the globe, including the Sydney painting, were exhibited too. The Sydney painting undoubtably belongs to this Titian modelling of the Queen. While the Sydney portrait has never undergone detailed scientific examination, it is most likely a late 18th century copy of the School of Titian. Irrespective of the date of the painting, her legacy and influence in European art was strong. Nicholson undoubtably would have been aware of her story.

The mythology of Catarina Cornaro, and the real woman, was separated during her life. So it's impossible to thread the two together now. But this portrait that made its way to the Antipodes, to me is a symbol of the links between Australia and Cyprus. It featured in the front piece of a book published in the 1950s, the very first English translation of the contemporary account.

It also represents a long archaeological tradition and scholarly tradition of Australian archaeologists working in Cyprus, of which the Pathos project is just the latest example. And many of the cultural treasures in the Nicholson collection have come from excavations conducted by Australian archaeologists.

It is one of my favourite objects within the Chau Chak Wing collection at the University of Sydney. During this series, we will discover other people's favourites, and invite you to discover your own. For now, I thank you for listening to "Object Matters". I am Craig Barker, and this recording took place on the lands traditionally owned by the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. The University of Sydney acknowledges and pays respect to the traditional owners.

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Transcribed by <https://otter.ai> and J. Evison.