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## **Object Matters Episode 2 Graveside Gifts - three white ground lekythoi**

Podcast transcription

Host: Dr Craig Barker

Guest: Dr Paul Donnelly

Craig Barker 0:20

Hello, my name is Craig Barker, and I'm the Manager of Education and Public Programs at the Chau Chak Wing Museum at the University of Sydney. Welcome to our podcast "Object Matters", where we discuss some of the amazing items in the collection of the Chau Chak Wing Museum. Today, my guest is Dr. Paul Donnelly, who works as the Deputy Director of the Chau Chak Wing Museum. And today he's got three really interesting vases from ancient Athens. So welcome, Paul.

Paul Donnelly 0:49

Thank you very much, Craig, good to be here.

Craig Barker 0:51

Thank you. It's lovely to have you along. Could you begin, I guess by telling us what your role at the museum entails as Deputy Director?

Paul Donnelly 1:00

Yes, well, I'm fortunate enough to be working with all the curators in developing the content for the new Chau Chak Wing Museum. So, just by brief background, we are amalgamating the Nicholson Museum of antiquity, the Art Gallery collection and the Macleay Museum of ethnography, science and natural history all together under one beautiful new building. So it's been great fun developing about 18 exhibitions to open at the end of the year.

Craig Barker 1:25

It must also be amazing to have all of the things we're talking about on this podcast and more to play with as well.

Paul Donnelly 1:32

That's right.

Craig Barker 1:34

How long have you been working with the Chau Chak Wing Museum?

Paul Donnelly 1:37

So I've been here four and a half years now. I came from the Powerhouse Museum where I was a curator at various levels and in my own specialist areas in decorative arts and numismatics. But I've always maintained my background in archaeology and I'm a practicing archaeologist in Greece and in Jordan.

Craig Barker 1:56

Yeah, I was going to ask you about your background before joining the team but obviously you've just alluded to it then in terms of the Powerhouse, but, how do you find, as someone who, as an archaeologist who works in the field and then working in the museum, what do you find to be the similarities and differences in terms of dealing with objects and materiality?

Paul Donnelly 2:17

A curious difference is that when you're dragging out of the ground, there's not a huge amount of preciousness. You've seen them coming from, from centuries, often millennia of dust and dirt. And of course, once they enter a museum, they achieve a whole different level of significance and preciousness. So, I find that quite interesting, especially when things you've actually dug up yourself are then in a museum, and you have to put gloves on.

Craig Barker 2:43

Yes, it's a different experience, isn't it? So I guess moving on. Today, you've chosen three objects, what have you, what have you chosen to discuss with our listeners?

Paul Donnelly 2:54

I have chosen a group of three objects called White Ground Lekythoi, and lekythos (which is the singular term for it) is basically a very tall clay bottle made on the wheel with a very, even thinner neck. And these were used to contain precious oils and often scented oils, which we used for toilet, for makeup, etc. And they were made in a variety of different finishes, but the white ground ones were made specifically for the grave. And this is something which makes them really special because the kind of decoration they feature is themed to that particular requirement. But it also means that the kind of technique in terms of painting, with paint on a white background, is really reminiscent of how they were painting, large scale, free type of painting in the galleries of ancient Greece. This is one of the few real insights we have into that practice which we recognize more readily from a modern perspective.

Craig Barker 3:57

Hmm, that's interesting. I want to come back and quiz you a bit more about their funeral backgrounds. But I should just mention that all three of them can be accessed by our listeners on the Chau Chak Wing Museum's collection search. So simply go to our website, which is sydney.edu.au/museum, and under the 'search the collection' function, enter the inventory numbers of the three objects. And those inventory numbers are NM41.1, NM 41.2 and NM41.3. Can I ask you to describe the three of them? I mean, if someone hasn't seen them before, the size and the shape and the feel of these vases?

Paul Donnelly 4:45

Absolutely. So they're, they're really quite formulaic. I mean, if you mentioned they're basically clay bottles with a narrowing neck at the top. So that's if you can visualize that. And they're very formulaic in terms of the drawings on them. So they're a very white, almost yellowish kind of white background. And on them are generally drawn very fine cartoon-like kind of outlines, individuals often each side of a grave monument called a stele. And so the dominant colour is a reddy-brown kind of outline. And they're drawn in such a way that you can really see that the development of how artists were able to represent the complexity of form and volume in simple lines, and it really is very much like how you imagine a cartoon today. What makes them quite different to other ancient Greek vases is the amount of overpainting that they were able to do in this so they could give them clothes, they could give them different coloured hair fillets or little ribbons that they would put around the stele or grave monument. These are all given these beautiful colours from blues to yellows, browns and reds.

Craig Barker 6:02

Of the three that are in our collection are they of the same size or... there's a little bit of variation in the in the size of them isn't there?

Paul Donnelly 6:10

There are. One is about 15 centimetres high and the other one's about 50 centimetres high, they do vary a great deal.

Craig Barker 6:18

Okay, now we've hinted upon its funeral connections, but can you elaborate a little bit more upon that? I mean, what made these objects so specific to, to their functionality associated with ancient death and burial? And of course, I gotta say, I mean, something that's always interested me in them quite personally, is how they were only produced over such a very short period of time. But could you talk a little bit more about their, their social history context within ancient Athens?

Paul Donnelly 6:46

Sure. So people often say when they walk into a museum of antiquities, how do these things survive and especially when they're complete objects. Of course this is because they had been deliberately buried - there's nothing quite like survival than being put into the ground. And the most common way that this will happen is in the grave context. So, the common belief of many ancient peoples, including the ancient Greeks was, there was life in the afterlife. And in order to help people enjoy this and travel to the next stage of, of life after death, they were given food, and in this case, these bottles, these surrounding bottles, which contain oil for their use after death.

Craig Barker 7:35

I always find it interesting that, you know, if you go and visit a modern Greek Orthodox cemetery, a different religious faith, but yet still, the concept of leaving behind olive oil as a gift for the dearly departed, is something which is has continued from antiquity into the modern world.

Paul Donnelly 7:54

Yeah, that's right. And, and that's partly what I read a lot about these objects - is that connection that they give to you, people who lived and died two and a half thousand years ago. And the kinds of illustrations they depict, which as I mentioned, are frequently just a couple of each side of this stele- each side of this grave marker. So what the artist does so successfully in terms of making them appropriate for the funeral context, is to have these two figures in close proximity but never quite engaging. Frequently, the hands are outstretched to each other, but they never touch. Their eyes, they're looking in towards each other, but their gaze never meets. And this is a really poignant kind of indication of grief in many ways. One of the individuals is coming to the grave to tie a wreath around the marker or to leave a little bottle, a drawn in bottle, of the same kind that's depicted, of oil as a gift for the deceased. And on the other side of this stele is the deceased themselves, not realizing that this person is there not able to engage with them, but almost like a depiction of the memory of that person within the visitor of the grave.

Craig Barker 9:03

Some of them are very, very haunting some of the scenes, aren't they?

Paul Donnelly 9:06

Absolutely beautiful.

Craig Barker 9:09

You're listening to ‘Object Matters’, the official podcast of the Chau Chak Wing Museum. My guest this episode is Dr. Paul Donnelly, Deputy Director of the museum and an archaeologist in his own right. Now moving on, Paul, and you've alluded to this a little bit in your previous answer, but you know, of the 700,000 objects within the collection that you could have chosen to speak about today, why did you choose these three particular lekythoi?

Paul Donnelly 9:35

I was first exposed to these by Professor Dick Green as an undergraduate at the University of Sydney. And I was immediately struck by their beauty, but also the fact that there were such evocative poignant depictions of individuals. Whilst they're two and a half thousand years old, they look like people that you can walk past in the street as well. You might look at them twice because they look as though they're wearing pajamas, or some very strange clothes, but nevertheless, I could really relate to what the artist is trying to convey in terms of the loss of someone that they love. So to me, they immediately - they were a fantastic way of, of demonstrating how little people have changed. In the end, people love and live much the same way then, thousands of years ago, as we do now. Those very basic requirements and hopes for life are shared across the millennia.

Craig Barker 10:33

Yeah, and the emotions that are rooted within the human experience, such as grief and loss.

Paul Donnelly 10:38

Exactly.

Craig Barker 10:40

So I mean, you know, normally at this point, I would ask you guess what meaning the object has to them, but I think you've very, very clearly elaborated there. It's kind of interesting, because you know, you saw it a number of years ago as an undergraduate. You've seen these objects on display. You've seen them in publications over the years. How do you find yourself responding to them each time you see them? Has your response to the objects changed as you've aged and grown yourself or...

Paul Donnelly 11:10

Fantastic question, because one of the delights of traveling overseas, of course, is going to museums. And there are some specific collections such as the National Archaeological Museum in Athens and the Acropolis museum and also other collections such as the British Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. They have some amazing examples of white ground lekythoi, and it's got to the point now where I go to see them specifically, I will go visit them as if they're old friends. And there's some particularly celebrated painters such as the Achilles painter or the painter of Group R, and the examples in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens are spectacular and I've had them on many occasions as my, my background on my phone, I visit them... and I just think it's really is like, like happening upon old friends.

Craig Barker 12:04

That's fantastic. Again that emotive response that a museum visit and a repeated museum visit can bring out time and time again.

Paul Donnelly 12:13

And that's why of all the amazing objects we have across our three collections, these are the ones I've chosen to talk about first.

Craig Barker 12:22

Excellent, excellent. Now you also you hinted upon the fact that, you know, some of the white ground lekythoi in other museums globally, we know the names of the artists who created them, or in some cases, the potters. This process of attribution, which was very, very big in classical archaeology in the early and mid 20th century where, you know, vases were attributed to the hand of an individual artists. Have the three lekythoi that we're talking about today in the Nicholson collection, have they been attributed to a specific artist?

Paul Donnelly 12:53

Yes, they have. Frequently in the case of white ground lekythoi, their names are attributed to the first vessel that they decided was the quintessential example of a particular painter's style. So there's the painter of New York is NM41.2, and the Triglyph painter is NM41.3. They, in common with many of the best lekythoi, they come from Athens, which is the real home of this technique. And then in the National Archaeology Museum in Athens, there's a recreated grave that had been dug in Athens and there are about 15 examples of these white ground lekythoi all around the skeleton, so you can see just how bespoke they were to that particular event.

Craig Barker 13:43

But all of them date to the second half of the fifth century BC, so a very important time in Athens' history as well for a whole city.

Paul Donnelly 13:51

And, and so this is another level in which I really enjoy them because these were made at the same time as those most famous monuments of Greece were being created. The Parthenon, 447 BC it began, and was completed in 432 BC - this is exactly the same period of time. And these were being made and in, in the volume of the lines that create these individual figures, you can really see that. And also in their serenity, you can see a very clear relationship to some of the most famous monuments in the world. And here they are in our own museum on these beautiful little vessels.

Craig Barker 14:33

Yeah, you're right. It's a very evocative experience to a time in which you saw such experimentation with the Athenian experiment with democracy and developments in theatrical productions and philosophical developments. It's a really significant moment in European history, isn't it?

Paul Donnelly 14:52

That's right. And these have all of these kinds of associations for me.

Craig Barker 14:57

So it's an interesting thing. I mean, obviously the Nicholson collection was a collection born out of a display in collecting of antiquities from the Mediterranean world. But Australia was not the most obvious place to find ancient Greek vases, unlike a museum in Europe or the United States. Can you tell our listeners how these three particular vases actually got to Sydney?

Paul Donnelly 15:18

Yes. So of course it was important that a museum was already at the University of Sydney, and it had been established in 1860 by Sir Charles Nicholson. And for many years afterwards, there had been a succession of significant curators, many of whom had specialties in ancient Greek art, and in the 1940s, Arthur Dale Trendall was the curator for the Nicholson Museum, and he had accumulated some of our finest vessels of this particular era, and he was in connection to a Cambridge scholar called Charles Seltman, and he asked him to get him some white ground lekythoi at auctions if he was able to come upon them. And so Charles found himself with three vessels, but 36 hours to get out of Paris before the Nazis took over the city. Thankfully, he managed to get on to a troop carrier and made his way to London. But the story didn't end there, because he then arranged to send them by ship during wartime, this is 1940, to Sydney and a few months after he'd sent them, Dale Trendall received a letter from the shipping line saying that unfortunately, due to enemy action, the ship had been lost. Of course he was very disappointed in this, these vessels would have been a fine addition to the collection, which of course they ended up being so, because it turned out that they were on the wrong ship. They went on to a different ship and managed to arrive in Sydney intact without any paperwork whatsoever.

Craig Barker 16:51

Literally, these vessels only survived the second world war because of a clerical administrative error?

Paul Donnelly 16:57

It seems to be yeah, that's right.

Craig Barker 16:59

Extraordinary, isn't it? And again, you know, the whole process of archaeology and just the fate of what survives and what doesn't. But to consider that within a modern context is extraordinary.

Paul Donnelly 17:11

And the number of levels that these objects continue to gather stories, as if they hadn't been through a fascinating past as it is, to have that as another layer is a delight.

Craig Barker 17:22

Well, thank you for that. That's a really fascinating story, Paul. Now, the one question that I'm going to ask every guest on this podcast is the following. In one word, can you tell us what these three objects signify for you? What do they mean for you?

Paul Donnelly 17:37

Connection. I think they, to me, they provide a real connection to lives long past, to emotions long disappeared, and yet still very clearly invoked within these simple lines on these beautiful slim vessels.

Craig Barker 17:55

That's beautiful. That is that's really quite extraordinary. Now of course, the Chau Chak Wing museum has yet to open at the point in time in which we're recording this particular podcast. And indeed, because of the COVID crisis, we're actually doing this digitally from our respective homes as well, like the rest of the world as we speak. But, you know, one of the exciting things is that when the museum does open in later 2020, these three objects are going to be on display, and they're going to be on display in an exhibition that you're curating. Could you tell us a little bit more about how they're going to fit into this larger exhibition, which is *Object/Art/Specimen*, the show that you're curating?

Paul Donnelly 18:36

Yeah, sure, well, *Object/Art/Specimen*, it's an opportunity across 200 square meters to demonstrate the huge benefits to bringing together these three collections, these three different museums. And in our increasingly multidisciplinary times, to bring these three collections together offers all whole manner of new opportunities in terms of teaching and learning, as well as, of course, the enjoyment of our general public. And so these particular vessels, in common with all the objects in *Object/Art/Specimen*, are arranged in surprising kinds of groups which demonstrate how, as different as these items are, they share many commonalities from which we can gain many different messages and insights. And borrowing some rare books from the Rare Book Library, a significant collection at the University of Sydney, I think across all those collections, there'll be some terrific surprises for the visitor.

Craig Barker 19:36

Including these three vessels. I guess, the final thing I would like to ask you is, when the museum is open to the public, what would you like our listeners to think about when they actually get the chance to see these three remarkable vases in the flesh.

Paul Donnelly 19:50

*Object/Art/Specimen* has been arranged in a number of very broad overarching themes, and I've tried, when possible not to put objects in the most obvious one - and so, rather than in 'Death', these particular vessels are in 'Love', a section on love. And I think that's, I think that's a clue to how the different ways that you can look at these things. People, for example, often think about the Egyptians. We know so much about the ancient Egyptians because of their mortuary temples, because of their burials... And so we think of them through death. But this is because they loved life so much, in the end, trying to perpetuate life on earth is all about love.

Craig Barker 20:34

What a wonderful place to end. So with, over the last few minutes we've gone from ancient Greece and the invention of democracy through to a journey of escape from the Nazis through to shipping to Australia to a 21st century, exciting, new museum development and 'love' is the theme of it all! What a great way to end!

Paul Donnelly 20:58

What a romantic!

Craig Barker 20:59

[laughs]. Thank you very much. You've been listening to ‘Object Matters’, the podcast of the Chau Chak Wing museum. Our guest this episode has been Dr. Paul Donnelly, archaeologist and Deputy Director of the museum collection. Thank you very much, Paul.

Paul Donnelly 21:13

It's been a great pleasure, Craig, thank you.

Craig Barker 21:15

Thank you. "Object Matters" is recorded on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. The University of Sydney and the Chau Chak Wing Museum acknowledge the traditional owners of these lands and pay respect to Elders past, present, and future.

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