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Classical Antiquities at Wellesley College

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This fall (2016), the Davis Museum at Wellesley College installed a new ancient Mediterranean gallery as part of a comprehensive reinstallation. Objects which have not been on view in decades (or ever) now fill the gallery. Observing this change, it is timely to look back at the ways that members of the Wellesley community have encountered the ancient world on campus. This website combines archival sources and oral histories collected over the course of the fall (2016) in order to get a sense of the teaching, learning, and culture around classical antiquity at Wellesley since it was established in 1870.

(Click here to view an interactive timeline which I produced as part of my preliminary investigation.)
The founders of the college, Henry and Pauline Durant, made it their goal to offer young women the same quality of education enjoyed by their peers at exclusively male institutions (such as Mr. Durant’s alma mater, Harvard College). At the time a typical college curriculum in the United States included European history, classical philology, the study of religion and the Bible, and Western art history. Courses in these disciplines were among those offered in the college’s earliest years. To aid these studies, the Durants and friends supplied the faculty and students with antiquities, genuine and in replica.

In 1875, the first students and professors moved into College Hall, which included an art gallery and a capacious library. In 1883, Elizabeth Denio, a professor of Art...
art gallery and a capacious library. In 1883, Elizabeth Denio, a professor of Art History and German, undertook Wellesley's first object inventory. In the *Catalogue of Works of Art Belonging to Wellesley College* she systematically listed and described every work of art by room and floor. The hallways were hung with photographs and prints of ancient sites and lined with plaster casts of classical sculptures, including the *Venus de Milo*.

A few ancient items were kept in the library, including an Egyptian papyrus fragment from a Book of the Dead (now in Wellesley College Special Collections), Greek and Roman coins, Greek pottery, and an Assyrian relief fragment (now at the Davis Museum). The Denio catalog, especially when reviewed beside the extensive collection of photographic prints that survive of College Hall's interior, is a valuable snapshot of late nineteenth century art collecting and display. (Luckily, most of the genuine classical antiquities and some of the casts were moved to growing number of satellite buildings on campus before the 1914 College Hall Fire.)

Isaac Farnsworth, a friend of the Durants, bequeathed the funds for an art museum before his death in 1886. On October 23, 1889, the Farnsworth Art Building and Museum opened to house Wellesley's growing art collection and be a facility for instruction in art history and studio art.
Alice Von Vechten Brown was appointed in 1897 to lead the museum and the School of Art (which later became the Art Department). She developed the Laboratory Method of Art History (also known as the Wellesley Method) in which students attempt to recreate the various art forms they study. She began to purchase antiquities for the museum with funds donated by Hannah Parker Kimball. These acquisitions, including the *Hellenistic Torso* (second from the left in the above photo) and the so-called *Wellesley Athlete* (second from the right in the above photo), formed the nucleus of the classical sculpture collection.
Bronze statues of the Greek goddesses of Wisdom and the Hearth stand at either side of the main entrance to Clapp Library, built in 1910 with funds donated by Captain John Beebe and Andrew Carnegie. The Caprioni Brothers of Boston (the same team that made the cast of the *Venus de Milo*) made these bronze copies of the *Lemnian Athena* (donated by the Class of 1887 in 1912) and the *Hestia Giustiniani* (donated by the class of 1888 in 1913). The *Lemnian Athena* appears to have had some special significance among the Seven Sisters Colleges. Bryn Mawr College has a plaster copy of the Lemnian Athena in a high display niche overlooking a reading area at their library. There is also copy of that cast at which students have left offerings to the goddess since at least the 1970s. The *Lemnian Athena* appears yet again in the seal of Barnard College, another Sister.

In 1936, a 5th century CE Roman mosaic floor from the Villa of Daphne, arrived at Wellesley. At that point it joined the *Wellesley Athlete* and the *Hellenistic Torso* in the North Gallery of the Farnsworth Museum. The moving of the mosaic, from the top floor of the Davis to its new location in the Greek and Roman Gallery, was one of the major components of the 2016 reinstall.
The same year, Alma Seipp Hay (Class of 1899) and her husband, William Sherman Hay, donated the Greek theater (the so-called "Hay Amphitheatre") behind Alumnae Hall. Near the top of the seating area, an inscription in Ancient Greek and in English translation reads:

ό τι καλόν φίλον ἀεί
“whatever is beautiful is ever dear”

Greek Prof. Barbara McCarthy (who arrived on campus in 1929) had started a tradition of yearly Greek Plays in 1934, and one imagines that Mrs. Hay wanted to support these efforts with a proper venue. Prof. Lefkowitz ‘57, a student of Prof. McCarthy’s, recalled how “fun” and “exciting” she and Latin Prof. Peg Taylor made the yearly Greek and Latin plays. Prof. Lefkowitz ‘57 “was always in the Greek plays with big parts because [she] had taken a couple of years of ancient Greek in high school,” unlike most of her classmates.

By the 1950s, the attitude and needs of the Art Department outgrew the neoclassical Farnsworth Building, and in 1958 it was demolished to make room for the very Modern Jewett Arts Center, designed by noted American architect Paul Rudolph. The Jewett hallways and a light-filled indoor courtyard, located near the faculty offices, became the museum. The Antioch Mosaic was installed in the floor (unprotected) of the “Sculpture Court,” surrounded by marble statues (including the Wellesley Athlete) and cases of Greek pottery.

Although the antiquities were prominently placed, Wellesley nonetheless was in the thrall of mid-century Modernism. One gets the sense that the installation in the Sculpture Court (ca. 1958-1993) was not unscholarly per se, but there is an interior design sensibility at work. At least six alumnae (Judy Hallett ‘66, Prof. R. Freed ‘74, Prof. R. Bedell ‘80, Maggie Scheyer ‘87, Prof. J. M. Musacchio ‘89, Becky Schindler ‘91) had generalized memories of the presence antiquities in the Sculpture Court, but not of specific objects. The primary impact of the installation was aesthetic, not informative. The anachronistic contrast of the ancient against the new amplified the Modern quality of Jewett.

Across the Academic Quad, the Classics Department (in Founders Hall) also had a modest collection of antiquities. This study collection was made up of "material culture"
modest collection of antiquities. This study collection was made up of "material culture" (not "art") objects which had been fed partially by "cast-offs" that didn't meet the artistic standards of the Jewett Museum and the Art Department. The Greek and Latin professors faced a common collection management conundrum: Should they prioritize preservation and security, or should they utilize this resource in their teaching? In the 1960s, small Greek and Roman objects were displayed in glass cases outside the Greek and Latin classrooms on the second and third floor of Founders Hall. The closet that now serves as the kitchenette in the so-called “Hidden Library” once housed a numismatics display cabinet.

In terms of academic use, Prof. Geffcken and one of her students, Becky Schindler '91, told me they occasionally used the coins in Latin courses. Otherwise, Judy Hallett '66 described a “feeling that [other small antiquities] were of inferior quality” and that students would be better served by looking at textbook illustrations from superior collections.

Prof. Lefkowitz '57 and Prof. Geffcken recounted how the collection suffered a series of thefts from the display cases in the summer of 1975. After that, the Greek objects were moved to a locked cabinet in Founders 302C, the most valuable Greek coins were transferred for safekeeping in the College's financial offices, and the Roman objects were kept in a locked drawer in Prof. Geffcken's locked office. Prof. Ray Starr, who joined the faculty in 1979, described “a sense that study collection shouldn’t be used [in the classroom or in display cases] very much if it involved getting things out of storage.”

The ancient objects were more or less forgotten until Prof. Bryan Burns began to recover them after he arrived at Wellesley over 30 years later (2008). The study collection has been in display cases in the Classics Department hallway since 2010, leading Prof. Starr to comment that “that the attitude [toward the collection] is changing. Having the display cases in the hallway changes things. It’s an obvious statement that those things are now out in public” for people to study and enjoy.

For many Wellesley students, their primary or only exposure to antiquity on campus is not at the Davis Museum and not in the Classics Department hallway; it's in the dorms. The Tower Court Complex (http://hcap.artstor.org/cgi-bin/library?a=d&d=p1945) is College Gothic, the Hazard Quadrangle (http://hcap.artstor.org/cgi-bin/library?a=d&d=p1921) is Elizabethan Gothic, and the so-called “New Dorms” (http://www.cbtarchitects.com/architecture/academic/student )
(built in the 1950s and 60s) are decidedly Modern. However, each of these residential areas has Classical Revival elements.

Claflin Hall was built in 1917 as part of the Tower Court Complex, where College Hall had stood just three years prior. The “Claf” living room windows are decorated with stained glass shields that contain the following Latin quote:

*Haec studia adolescentiam alunt [...] senectutem oblectant.*

It means: “These studies sustain youth [and] entertain old age.” It’s an appropriate sentiment, if a bit nostalgic, for the young women who spend time studying on the couches below. Across campus, other dorms have similarly neo-classical references in stained glass. Pomeroy Hall (built in 1904) and Cazenovia Hall (1905) are part of the Hazard Quad. “Pom” (Wellesley home of Arlene Cohen ‘01) and “Caz” (Wellesley home of Emily Mullin ‘17) have identical stained glass windows in their first floor reception areas with colorful medallions representing the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Byzantium.
Judy Hallett ‘66, recalls living in the New Dorms, specifically Bates Hall. She sent me a very charming photograph of herself with John Rood’s 1952 abstract stone sculpture, *Persephone*, located right outside Bates Hall. Though it is more commonly (perhaps affectionately?) known to students as the “vulva statue,” the nearby plaque gives its proper name: *Persephone*. Nearby, there is an accompanying *Demeter Wall*. This sculpture set references the Greek myth of Demeter and the kidnapping of her daughter Persephone by Hades.

Wellesley’s campus is rich with opportunities to study, work with, and live with antiquities. Currently, students and faculty concentrating on the art/material culture of antiquity are excited (however critically) for the possibilities in digital humanities. We are experimenting with applications of new technologies to the research, content creation, and teaching of classical antiquity. There is a relatively recent cross-disciplinary self-awareness (including theories of gender and post-colonialism) being brought to bear on classroom discussions. Students are asked to reflect critically on both the ancient contexts and modern lives of the objects. The campus community of ancient art enthusiasts are (to paraphrase a classical adage) “making haste, slowly” towards a current understanding of classical antiquity that is cross-cultural, multi-disciplinary, and object-oriented.
Sources Consulted:

- Wellesley College Archives
- Wellesley College Special Collections
- The Wellesley community members (including alumnae and faculty) who gave their time and memories to make this body of oral histories as rich as it is.

Special thanks to Jen Bartle (Library and Technology Services) who recommended the terrific digital humanities tools I used for this project:

- Timeline JS (https://timeline.knightlab.com), by Knight Lab at Northeastern University
- Scalar (http://scalar.usc.edu/), by the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture

This website was produced as part of an Independent Study conducted within the Art Department at Wellesley College. My advisor for the project is Prof. Kimberly Cassibry. mjustus@wellesley.edu

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