



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 3 (2021)

CHAU CHAK WING MUSEUM (Sydney University collections)

Transcript of interview:

DR PAUL DONNELLY

Deputy Director

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Tim Stackpool:

The museum's Deputy Director, Dr. Paul Donnelly works with the curators and broader team in developing the institution's exhibition program. Before this job, he was for many years, a curator of decorative arts and design at the Powerhouse Museum. It was there that his curatorial responsibilities expanded across many collections, including numismatics, ceramics, furniture and design.

Tim Stackpool:

Paul's PhD focused on bronze age ceramics. He is the co-director of the University of Sydney Zagora Archaeological Project in Andros, Greece, and is a member of the university's Pella excavation team in Jordan, which of course, he can't visit at the moment because of current travel restrictions.

Tim Stackpool:

But he can join us on the podcast right now via Zoom. Paul, thanks for the chat.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Great pleasure, Tim. Thank you for having me.

Tim Stackpool:

I want to come to the fact that this is a great space. When you first walk in to the museum, when you get the chance to do so, you do see this as a... as I say, a great space, but before we get to that, tell us about the history of the Chau Chak Wing Museum and why it is so important, I guess, not just to Sydney University, but to, I guess, the arts and culture, and museums in general in Australia?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Sure, Tim. Well, objects have been used at the University of Sydney since very early on in its inception. So as early as 1860, the then Provost, Sir Charles Nicholson had been around in the 1850s, he'd gone through Egypt and through Greece and Italy, acquiring eventually 3,000 objects that he felt could inspire and instruct students in their teaching and learning.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

He thought it was a kind of a physical connection to the old world, if you like.

Tim Stackpool:

And in terms of the university having such a great collection such as this, do you find that in-between the faculties there's competition as to who gets what space and what's going in, at what particular time?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

We have a very healthy discussion with academics. Part of our process of exhibitions is a program review group, which includes academics from across the whole of the campus. We want to be as relevant as we can, and of course, there're the limitations of our own collections. So it's more about a discussion as to what we can provide for them to teach with, within the limitations about albeit diverse

collection, and how best they can use it, but they don't actually devise the exhibition program and such like.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

So it really is... It's about a conversation between us and them, but that being said, we also have a new role, the new Chau Chak Wing Museum has given us whole new facilities and infrastructure, which helps us to really embed collections within teaching and learning. And so we have object-based learning studios, three in total, in addition to a school's education room, and an auditorium.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And also, a new position of Academic Engagement Curator, which works with academics to try and find how we can help them teach with objects in surprising areas.

Tim Stackpool:

Given that, I wonder whether you feel at all constrained in a way that you have to tailor some of the collection of the displays that you do, to reflect the curriculum at the time in any number of subjects or faculties, is that the case?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

No, it really isn't the case at all. I think academics generally, they fit in with what we put on display. And I think that most of the strengths of our collection, are the nature of the history of the university, and of course, that's gone hand in hand with the strengths of our academic community.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And so archeology, for example, we've had lots... Over the past 100 years, we've had really fruitful collaborations with numerous institutions around the world, which has resulted in us having an excellent collection that covers the whole of the Mediterranean region with natural history. The whole Alexander Macleay collection is essentially a really important colonial collection of the origins of taxonomy.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

When you've got those kinds of actions, which have grown with academic and execution, academic teaching, I think there's a natural synergy between those two anyway. With new courses, they tend to work with us in finding ways that they can use our collections.

Tim Stackpool:

I just want to ask you a little bit about the collection and what people can expect to see if they haven't been to the museum already. We're talking more than just artefacts here, aren't we? We're not just talking about archaeological content. Are we talking about art as well?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Absolutely. So the Chau Chak Wing Museum is the bringing together of three existing earlier institutions, the Nicholson Museum which started off in 1860 with a collection of Egyptian and ancient Greek, and south Italian material in the main. And that has since grown from 3,000 objects to over 30,000 objects.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow!

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And then by 1890, we had the Macleay Museum opening, which was set up by the Macleay family of Elizabeth Bay House. They had gained quite a name for themselves in terms of their early research in the taxonomy of natural history, and a real enlightenment kind of product, and an obsession of the Victorian period.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And whilst the early collections were very much an entomological insect collection over time, the three major Macleays who dissipated in the formulation of that, diversified into ethnography and into science, and mammals and birds, and other parts of the natural world.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And since then, we've got 60,000 historic photographs added to that collection. Our scientific instruments and scientific models are the products of the evolution of different technologies and departments, and the inevitable kind of casting of the material. We don't take everything we're given of course, but we do pick and choose some amazing equipment that has been used in the past for being able to use different equipment in the scientific arena.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And then there's an art collection and from 1860, Sir Charles Nicholson had conventional flatwork art in his collections amongst antiquities. And since then, our collections have grown to 9,000 items, which includes the Power Collection. And the Power Collection is frequently associated with the MCA, where it was first displayed in entirety or in sections anyway.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

That is Sydney University collection, and we now have for the first time, the kind of facilities and space that we can show that collection.

Tim Stackpool:

The work that you do is not made possible just by a single benefactor, but just run through them for us?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Sure. So Dr. Chau gave us \$15,000,000 which was closely followed by the Ian Potter Foundation of \$5,000,000, Penelope Seidler, \$750,000,000, and the Nelson Meers Foundation provided \$1,000,000. And so that was enough... That 22,500,000 was enough to really generate the confidence from the university to support the Chau Chak Wing Museum with another \$40,000,000.

Tim Stackpool:

And as anyone in the business will tell you, it's not just about having a huge warehouse space in order to be able to hang and present artefacts. The architecture as well in your museum, it's grand in a way, not minimalist, but beautifully finished as well.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Yeah, we were very fortunate. JPW Architects, they had come already from a background with heritage buildings and with cultural institutions, including the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. But we also had FTC Builders and the team they assigned to us with Branko and Chris and Matt really, very quickly got the difference between a public institution suitable for a splendid collection, as opposed to an office block. And so I think between the architects and the builders, we came up with a fantastic building.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And then in the development of the exhibitions, we decided to use four different designers. So four different designs throughout the four floors of exhibition space, have given us theatrical spaces, serene spaces, all kinds of different tempos, which I think is part of the success of the institution. It really is a wonderful place to visit, to its best advantage.

Tim Stackpool:

And that's the wonderful thing too, Paul, but I just wonder thinking philosophically as well, and the question here that I've got in front of me is to do with how having such a museum assists with learning. But in general, what do we learn from having collections like this? Not necessarily the collection that the university holds, but in general, and from your experience, what do we learn from having art works available to us in this sense?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Examining objects close up, looking at objects gives you the ability to look at things from totally different perspectives. People bring all kinds of different experiences with a single object. So in the first instance, that interdisciplinary nature of, which is increasingly part of our world, objects really help us deal with both seeing different perspectives and also exploring those different perspectives.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

I think it's well known in terms of what we know, what we call object-based learning, is that we use different parts of our brain and it's been demonstrated that students retain a lot more because of the multiple, they're not just listening or they're not just reading. They're using all different kinds of senses, including touch and smell, and size, of course.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

So it's a different way of engaging with the world. And for a lot of students, I know for me as an archaeologist, the physical connection that those objects give you to people and places and events, is a very powerful thing.

Tim Stackpool:

Do we learn from the past in terms of not making similar mistakes again? Do you see that when you're... perhaps in the past, when you've been on a dig, do you think, "Well, this is when perhaps humankind learned that this was not the way to do something, this is not the direction to go in?" And is that sometimes reflected in perhaps pieces of art that you have there?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

I think we should learn more from looking at objects in that way. When you're dealing with deep time, I think you're more aware of how little we've changed. One of my favourite things that I show people in

the Chau Chak Wing Museum is a mortar and pestle, a basalt mortar and pestle from the Wadi Hammeh excavations from the University of Sydney. And it's 13,000 years old, and yet staggeringly, it's exactly what you would find on your kitchen bench with perhaps the remains of some basil in the bottom.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

So I think that when you consider how little we've changed and how the concerns of life, if we peel away all the modern conveniences, in the end, we want to feed and we want safety for our families, and a healthy life. And what struck me through looking at collections and also being an archaeologist is in the end, how little we have changed.

Tim Stackpool:

How different is perhaps the public's experience with what the museum offers? How does that differ to what students may enjoy by being able to engage with the museum? I guess I'm asking, as a member of the public, if I go to the museum, what sort of experience can I expect? And what would you, as a director at the museum, would hope that I would take away with me?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Part of the whole *raison d'être* of building a new museum is to give us that kind of critical mass that enabled us to be open. That's a major difference to what we've had before, when we've been three smaller institutions freaking with their hard to find, they were hard to find, that's no longer our position.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And so part of, and we had private and a great deal of private philanthropy, but also, the university itself stumped up \$40,000,000 towards this project. And part of expectations, in addition to contributing to the teaching and learning and embedding collections in more accessible and relevant way to teaching, was to be a more friendly public facing gateway to the university.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Many people have had no reason to come on campus, which is pretty large slice to think of [inaudible 00:12:08] kind of area, unless they worked here or students, or had some other business. But for a great deal of our local community and for our broader general public, there was no reason to come to university.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

We now have a much... We have a real reason to come to the university, and the museum was devised in a way that the exhibitions really are for a general audience. Say, if you're an archaeology student, or if you're about biology student, or finance student, you will have some classes which are very much in your area of interest.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

You will also know quite a bit about those areas, but for the rest of the collection and the rest of the exhibitions, you're still general audience. So our 2,000 square meters of gallery space, whilst they're very informative, they're also very accessible in the way that you would expect of a public museum.

Tim Stackpool:

We have a lot of industry professionals who listen to the podcast, and I just wonder if I can talk to you about change management a little bit. When you talked about the three original galleries and museums which the collections are drawn from, did you have any challenges in terms of pulling those three different entities together, and then putting them all under a single roof in terms of managing human resources as well, and past philosophies in how these collections were held?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

In 2003, the three very separate institutions were brought under an umbrella kind of administrative organization headed by David Ellis, the Director. And so he introduced other roles such as the Collection Manager and Conservator to work across all those collections. So that was a way of professionalizing the institutions, bringing in new expertise, but it also really informed future plans in which we find ourselves now in having a new museum. It was clearly demonstrated, but in the end, that was the great way to go.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Inevitably having been independent, there's a lot of... Our curators are experts in their fields, they're very passionate about the areas. There's inevitable advocacy for representation of your collections. I've been in that position myself as a curator in the past. And so as Deputy Director, looking across all the curators in the collections, it was my role to try and manage that, to make sure that we got the best kinds of outcomes for our audience in the main, so that we weren't hiding some of our big points of difference, such as the Egyptian collections, for example, which is the largest and best in Australia. There were clear parts of the collections which had to have a very good showing.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And so in the end, we whittled down 60 ideas in our design briefs when I came, to 17 exhibitions. And that doesn't mean that all the rest have gone to waste. It just means that we already have been working on a forward schedule. There's lots of opportunities to explore different parts of the collections in different ways.

Tim Stackpool:

But how do you get them now to all speak to each other?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

I think there was a lot of expectations that when people would come to the new museum, we'd have this jumble of artifacts and art with each other. But I think that what people will find is we have exhibitions that are clearly from their original constituent museums, but in different arrangements.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

So we haven't got each museum per floor. There's a lot more mixture than that, but in terms of their exhibitions, there's varying degrees of blending depending on the positive outcomes for the audience, and for the interpretation of that material. And so, the most blended of all is the introductory show, which I curated, Object/Art/Specimen, which is a celebration of the bringing together of those three museums for those people who didn't know what the origins were.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

But also a demonstration of the kinds of conversations people can get going, surprising kinds of juxtapositions between disparate materials. And so, part of that involves having four of our lovely Red Cedar Macleay cases mounted on plinth. So they're both objects in their own right, but also receptacles for objects.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And six themes which go from sex love and death, right the way through to chaos, pattern and order. And I think that when people have a look at that exhibition, I think they'll get an... it's like a veneer of the kinds of conversations and the kinds of outcomes that we can get in the future.

Tim Stackpool:

In order to pick out the objects to use and the direction in which to go, Paul, I'm wondering how do you approach that? Do you look at every object that's at your disposal and see how that formulates a pattern in your mind? Or do you take a single object and then see if you can actually draw other stories from that using other objects that may be in the collection?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

I think curatorially people generally start with a theme, and so there'll be a particular issue. Frequently, it has to have some strength in your collection, or else you know where to borrow other material from neighbouring and further afield institutions. In the case of the introductory show, that was the more complex, is whilst I come from an archeological background, I didn't have anywhere near the same amount of knowledge about the art collections and the natural history and science.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And so we had a lot of brainstorming with the curators about if we were to deal with these particular things, what kinds of objects would they suggest would be suitable for those things? And frequently it was the left of field, more surprising kinds of objects or an Object/Art/Specimen in the introductory show, just to be a bit more playful.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And one of my little vignette is Eclectus parrots. So there are 15 dead parrots, they're not sleeping. Sadly, they are dead and they've been dead for 130 years. And they show a very unusual, major sexual dimorphism for that kind of species. And so strong was this, that naturalists were of the opinion that these were separate species, that the males and the females were separate species into the 20th century.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And so, within the theme of sex, love, and death, this is a commentary about gender stereotyping, and it could possibly be the first time that parrots have been used in that way.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And certainly, it's coming from left field, no doubt about it. I ask this question pretty much of every curator after they put a show together; has it met your expectations or you're always left with that gnawing feeling of, "Gee, I just really wish I could have closed this off with one other piece or one other direction?"

Tim Stackpool:

How settled are you in your mind, even just talking about the introductory show, Object/Art/Specimen, are you satisfied? Are you at peace with yourself with how that came together?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

I think there's always the ones that got away, and occasionally I come upon an object to think, "Ooh, wow. That would have been really good in that particular case." But we did have a lot more objects, and then as is typical of the kind of process of curating a show, you fill it up with lots of things and then you start pairing back.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

But yeah, they have been some items which I think that would have been a really nice thing to include them.

Tim Stackpool:

Going back to the educational aspect of this, and universities over time at times, have been great provocateurs of social thinking. Do you think, and do you have items in your collection which perhaps the public may find quite provocative, or do you have plans for perhaps controversial, more controversial exhibitions coming up?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

I think that's one of the great advantages of being a university institutions, that we do have a lot more autonomy to deal with more controversial kind of issues. I can't think of anything immediately at the moment, the presentation of human remains in the Egyptian Gallery for example...

Tim Stackpool:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Has to be dealt with very carefully. And we have mediated through our indigenous audiences and through Sydney Metro to make sure that we had the proper kind of protocols for showing human remains.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

But I think that in the future, we certainly won't be shying away from the kinds of conversations that could be difficult for other more mainstream institutions.

Tim Stackpool:

Could I ask you, and this is not a provocative question coming off the back of that, and it's not necessarily a question that I'll ask of art galleries so much, but in terms of the long-term ethics and thinking changes over time, Paul, I understand that, but in acquiring artefacts that perhaps have traditional or indigenous significance, acquiring those and then putting them on display, how do you weigh that up in your mind?

Tim Stackpool:

And what's the general thinking within the educational museum business, if there's such a thing at the moment, of actually holding on to such artefacts and displaying them, how do you approach that in your own head?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Around the world there's a lot of soul-searching in terms of those kinds of approaches, and I think that in Australia, New Zealand as well, we're certainly approaching best practice and we consider ourselves to be custodians of that kind of material. And all of our indigenous displays have been done through our indigenous curator and other curators with communities.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And so in the formation, for example, of our eastern Arnhem Land Djalkiri exhibition, we brought down six elders two-and-a-half years ago from Yolnu, for a week to talk to our designers and our curators about how they wanted their material to be presented in the way that they felt most comfortable represented them.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And so that's why the title is Welcome To The Yolnu Foundations, and so they consider this material to be equivalent to our university kind of texts. They are broom full of symbolism and personal stories. And so through that kind of community liaison, I think that it makes the presentation of those things a far more ethical outcome.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

We have our Ambassadors display too, which consists of eight showcases dotted around the four floors of displays, which represent... They present objects from our collections, indigenous collections, representing different communities across Australia. And all of those have been done with with those representative communities, and the indigenous voice has given primacy.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

The Djalkiri exhibition, indigenous voices in red text, which is a larger font than our curators.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes. No doubt about the level of respect which you're showing for such things. I just recall actually, while you're answering that question, I think there was a museum in the US that returned quite a number of artefacts to Papua New Guinea, if I'm right. Are you familiar with that story?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Yes, had lots of repatriation, and Sydney University has been at the forefront of repatriation of material, and notably human remains since the 1990s.

Tim Stackpool:

Right.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And before, there was actually Federal government assistance, and that kind of thing. We really were at the forefront of that. And if they would see that if we have objects in our stores which are considered... They're stored as keeping places, we separate material that's for females eyes or for male eyes, separate from each other, and mediate who can see those items, we have total open access for those communities.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

If there was any real discussion about wanting things returned to a community, then we would be more than happy to discuss [inaudible 00:23:49]

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, that's great news and great to hear. And of course, not unexpected at all, Paul, to hear that from you.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

No.

Tim Stackpool:

You made mention earlier on about a number of benefactors. Over your entire career, have you been surprised at the level of generosity, substantial generosity that benefactors have offered when it comes to things like your archaeological work, your digs?

Tim Stackpool:

With the building of something like the facility that you're in at the moment, is it still staggering to you, the amount of money that people are prepared to put towards such an institution?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Well, it is. Given that this is my chosen profession which I have been in for over 30 years now, I also am very gratified that people give us that kind of confidence and recognition that they also consider, the keeping of material and this kind of collective memory and the connection these objects give to us, but they also consider this to be an important fashion and then you fall or audiences around the world.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And so we're of course, very grateful to people for recognizing that.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And as a recipient of that sort of funding, do you feel sometimes over obliged to perhaps deliver on a product when you receive such funding? Not necessarily in the position you're in now, but over time, if I can just draw on your years of experience as you mentioned...

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Yeah, Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tim Stackpool:

How do you work that as an individual, as a professional in your trade, when perhaps a result is expected and the pressure is on, maybe sometimes you can't deliver it?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

I think there's a common misconception about sponsorship and donations. So all of the donations that are given to us come with no strings attached. There's no expectation of any input into what we display or how we display it, and the messaging that we give. And we wouldn't take the money if that was the case, it's really important for institutions to be independent in the way that they present their collections.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

And museums are a trusted source of information for the public. That's why we exist and that's why people come to see us. We can't confuse people in terms of how we do things. So sponsorship on the other hand can come with different kinds of expectations, and the University of Sydney Museums has never had any sponsorship. It is all free donations given by generous benefactors.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Very good. Very generous indeed. Just talking about you a bit though, Paul, while I have you here, you've got a remarkable history. Something like 27 years, you're working at the Powerhouse Museum. You don't just push the pens. You've worked in the field, you've got the Indiana Jones type experience, if I can bring it down to that level.

Tim Stackpool:

Now you're working in the museum. How have you been able to switch? Has this just been an evolution for you to be able to work from field work to the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, and then moving in to this museum at the University of Sydney? How have you been able to kind of move through this cultural change in your life and your career?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

I've always done both at the same time, and I'm really thrilled to say that I've been going to Jordan since the late 1980s, and I've been digging in Greece since 2012. Thanks to the generosity of the places in which I worked, there's been a lot of respect for keeping up your original passions, which is why I work in museums in the first place.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

They, of course, is a great deal of integration between the two. A lot of archaeologists or people who've been trained as archaeologists have ended up working in all kinds of areas of the museum. And I'm very fond of telling people that at one time space technology incubator, [inaudible 00:27:29] as Space Technology Curator, Kerry Doherty was an archaeology student as well.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

In the end, it's a way of learning about how to interpret material culture, and it can be applied in lots of different ways. So I should be coming back from Jordan right now. I should have been in Jordan the last couple of months, but that trip is a COVID casualty.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Do you have any trips planned? I guess that one is just being held off and held off, and held off until you can fly again.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

Yes, that's right. And so on the Zagora excavations on Andros, we're going through the motions of applying for a linkage grant. So there's always lots to do at home when you're not home on site.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, and just going back to that 27 years with the Powerhouse Museum, this is a great opportunity that you were presented with to work here, and going through the application process, it's tough. It's tough, but were you torn at that moment when you thought, "Oh, perhaps I should apply for this job and leave the work that I've been doing at the Powerhouse for so long?" How did you manage that mentally?

Dr Paul Donnelly:

But the Powerhouse, I think curators is one of those positions where you just get better and better at your job. You get to know the collections more, you get to recognize interesting and surprising connections across different collections. I had no intention really of leaving the Powerhouse until this great opportunity came, and it suddenly seemed like a really appropriate left turn.

Dr Paul Donnelly:

I had been doing my PhD when I was at the Powerhouse, but it was in Near Eastern. It was in Jordanian ancient ceramics from 1550 to 4050 BC. It seemed to just recalibrate things in a way that was irresistible really, and I've had a fantastic five years at the University of Sydney.

Tim Stackpool:

As I said in the introduction, Paul, I had some email correspondence from a number of listeners who said, "It's about time you did a conversation about this great new museum at the University of Sydney." And it's been a remarkable 30 minutes or so that we've had to talk about this so far. And I really appreciate your time on the podcast.