Provenance Inconnue and Other Stories: Developing Engaging Labels for Ancient History Collections

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Abstract

Museum labels are typically designed with fine art objects in mind and identify key elements of a work of art, such as the location, artist, and date of creation. This approach is generally unsuitable for telling the stories of archaeological collections, in which artefacts are often fragmentary, and the details of items are either unknown or not essential to understanding how they were used. This type of label does not allow much space for stimulating visitors' imaginations, and it is even less conducive to inviting a critical response. As a thought-experiment in the possibilities of object biography, we offer a case study of a humble bronze figurine in Musée L's archaeological collections. Despite its missing provenance and incomplete provenience, we developed a series of display interventions through which its story could be told in new ways.

Keywords: archaeological collections; labels; museum interpretation; storytelling; provenance

Introduction[1]

Upon first casting eyes on Musée L at the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain) in Belgium, visitors may not apprehend what type of museum it is. The raw concrete brutalist facade gives little clue as to its contents. Even in the foyer, the exhibition spaces are out of view on the upper floors. The only hint as to the museum's focus is a piece of wall art, a red thread or *fil rouge* that starts at a central point and spirals out to include five strings of symbols – to be surprised, to question, to transmit, to be moved and to contemplate – that some may recognize as the utopian text of Thomas More (fig.1). Around these symbols are placed objects, including an ammonite fossil, a cast of a Corinthian capital, a wooden carved grade society figure from Oceania, an abstract sculpture made of brass and a small round mirror that reflects the visitor as part of the museum. The eclectic mix of materials combined with the illegible script presents a compelling enigma. Looking for hints, visitors immediately go in search of a label, something to aid them in interpreting the display. Any information they find will frame their understanding of the museum, its collections and the stories both embody.[2]

Whether they are on extensive illustrated panels or small cards, curated communications have become part of the standard toolkit of visitor engagement. Their most common manifestation is the object label that provides the basic information required to identify what is on display according to the disciplinary standards and conventions for that type of object. For archaeological labels, this means a few lines of text identifying the object, where and when it was first manufactured or used, what it is made of and its inventory number. However, as many archaeological collection items in museums do not come from excavations that have been professionally documented, even this basic level of information can be difficult to source.[3] The result is a label characterized by generic statements, gaps in information, and unanswered questions, which provides little context for visitors. Does 'Rome (?)' indicate that an object's style matches that of others coming from Rome? Was it bought in Rome? Did the antiquities dealer indicate Rome as the origin but there is no documentation to prove this?

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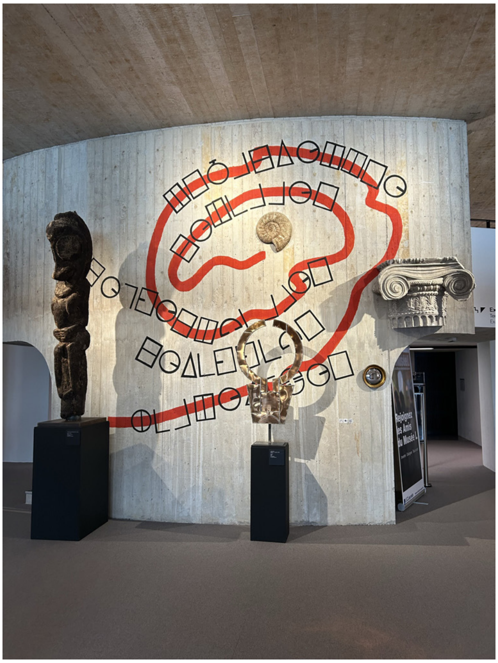

Figure 1. Entrance foyer of the Musée L with a view of the Fil Rouge featuring collection objects. Photo taken by the authors on 10 October 2023.

The ability of such short labels to help visitors identify what they are looking at is questionable. Numerous critiques have been leveled at the efficacy of these so-called 'tombstone' labels, (Kersel 2021: 263; Marlowe 2016a; Marlowe 2016b; Chippindale and Gill 2000). The 'tombstone' metaphor suggests how the label provides a summary of the object's name and relevant dates, and marks the place in which it is laid to rest. However, that analogy only further challenges labels' function, as an object is never really at rest in a museum. Besides the turnaround in displays, changes also occur on an interpretive level. This happens each time an object is included in a new tour, study or activity. Objects are continuously reframed according to changing conceptions of history and heritage among scholars, professionals and audiences. Could a label account for the multiplicity of stories that an object is able to embody, while also encouraging a dynamic reading of an archaeological object's identity? In this article, we explore how critical object biographies (Alberti 2005; Costello et al. 2021; Drazin 2020; Kopytoff 1986) can develop a more engaging and inclusive interpretation strategy for archaeological collections. An object biography examines the full story of an object, from the time it was made, through its various uses and changing of hands, to its deposition in the ground, followed by its modern entanglements. This approach also expands the range of frameworks used to interrogate collections, so museum professionals can re-examine the positions from which our inventories, displays and labels are developed. Engagement with alternative modes of thinking brings 'our personal and institutional relationships to categories, terminologies and meanings' into relief, as Wayne Modest puts it.[4] Breaking out of disciplinary and institutional norms allows an extension of the object biography beyond the didactic, single-perspective impressions of collections created when focusing solely on archaeological provenience and museum display.[5] An object for which there is little known data gains complexity with a mapping of the associations it has gained throughout its afterlives, extending its relationships and enriching its storytelling potential.

To illustrate the proposed approach, the article will present a single case study of a small bronze figurine from the archaeological collections at Musée L. After a brief introduction to the museum collections and to the theoretical frameworks of object biography and critical labeling that underpin our approach, we will examine this object in detail, considering its physical qualities and the way it is currently interpreted within the museum gallery. The challenges posed by labelling this unprovenienced object will lead us to reimagine the process of identifying the object through the deployment of alternative epistemologies. To elaborate upon these alternatives we will pass by the enigmatic wall art of the Musée L foyer, climbing up through the museum to reconsider the object through the lenses of different displays, from research-oriented typologies to artistic interventions. Musée L's varied collections put the museum in a unique position to engage openly with discussions about categorization practices that shape perceptions today. They also enable us to discuss many ways of knowing, being, and communicating within cultural spaces.

Musée L and its collections

Although the museum in its current form has only existed since 2017, Musée L has a much longer history (Danckers and Van den Driessche 2022; Querinjean 2021; Van den Driessche and Druart 2020). Many of its collections were acquired by professors and their networks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period there was no single university museum, but rather a series of collections, subdivided into many university departments, filling offices, lecture halls, and, eventually, dedicated galleries. The management of each collection was passed on through a succession of professors, who used their time as curators to add material based on their own research and the interests of their social circle. A substantial number of collections were intentionally formed as teaching tools, with content selected to reflect the subjects of university courses.

During the 'Louvain Affair' in 1968 the Catholic University of Leuven was split into KULeuven in Flanders and UCLouvain in Wallonia. The UCLouvain collections were brought together in a newly established campus at Louvain-la-Neuve. These were put on display in 1979, upon the founding of UCLouvain's university museum, the first of its kind in Belgium. Since then, the collections have been enriched by a series of donations. 'Musée L' is the result of the 2014 - 2017 re-branding of the museum. During this time the museum's extensive collections were moved from the basement of the arts library to a refurbished building that had previously contained the university's science library. This building was one of the first large-scale architectural projects designed for the new campus after the 1968 split; the dedication of the full space to Musée L is indicative of the museum's status within the university (Laconte 2009). This brutalist building houses the university's highly eclectic mix of collections in displays that acknowledge their disciplinary entanglements. Rather than taking a single approach to its inherited collections, the museum has chosen to embrace its wider relevance, providing a variety of viewpoints as to how individuals might engage with collections within a university museum, ranging from the scientific analysis of the researchers' gallery to an amateur's collection on the top floor (Simon 2016).

The multifarious history of the museum and its collections means that the eclectic holdings have not all been subjected to full analysis. Object provenience is rarely known due to the reliance of most of Musée L's original archaeological donors on commercial vendors. Since the split in 1968, all donors have been required to provide clear documentation for the provenance of collections dating before 1970. However, the collections kept at the Catholic University of Leuven were not held to the same scrutiny when they were gathered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, much of the documentation was lost during both world wars, as the university in Leuven experienced two episodes of destruction, including fires that were set during the sack of Leuven in August 1914, and the bombardment of the town by the Allies in May 1944 (Lipkes 2007: 444-455; Coppens et al. 2005: 135; Derez and Génicot 2001). The division of the collection after 1968 led to a further loss of context (Laporte 1999).[6] The lack of documentation for many collection items still presents a challenge for museum staff and researchers. Extensive analyses are required to provide reliable narratives about the original contexts of these objects.

In a conscientious attempt not to mislead visitors, the museum has made frequent use of question marks in the short labels created for displays in order to indicate areas of uncertainty. Individual objects are expanded upon in a general way, connecting each object to iconographic themes or a broader category such as storage or cults, which would be familiar to visitors. While this approach has its merits, there are other possibilities for engaging ethically with objects without a provenience that would allow for a more direct connection to their history. An object-biographical approach provides one pathway to achieving this goal.

Among the works in the collection of the Musée L are objects from the ancient Mediterranean. Like so many diverse works in the museum, these require visitors to re-orientate their perspectives, to think about where and when the works originated, and what purposes they serve in the museum. Within the open, terraced galleries of the Musée L, in which different collections are arranged in conversation with each other, reorientation mainly takes place through the object labels: a glance at a label transports visitors to the past by invoking a date and a place.

Object biography

The original location and date of antiquities that come from private collections, such as those in the Musée L, are often unknown. Curators must make educated guesses based on information in museum files, or make comparisons to other works, using clues such as style and dress. Such guesswork is subtly indicated on the label, sometimes with a question mark. Therefore, the label, which is the visitor's main point of entry into the world of the object, does not offer authoritative information. It gives the visitor a guess, a direction, an idea about the origin of the work, but does not usually share the basis on which that conclusion was reached. The label does not say, 'this object came from a vendor in Cairo who claimed it was from ancient Italy; our curators agree that the style of the object is consistent with similar objects from Italy, ranging across several centuries. Therefore, while its origin is unknown, the curators estimate it is from Italy.' Instead, it might say 'Italy (?). 2nd to 3rd century (?).' The question mark provides some honesty, but it does not indicate how far that uncertainty extends. Is it a question of where in Italy, or Italy rather than Africa, or whether it comes from Italy unless it is a modern forgery? Even for those equipped with knowledge about museum practice and the history of collecting, a question mark is vague and suggestions of provenience are notoriously slippery (Marlowe 2016a; Chippindale and Gill 2000). The label is doubly misleading: first, in suggesting a location and/or date, and second, in failing to acknowledge the source of that supposition.[7] As Marlowe and Kersal have argued (Kersal 2021; Marlowe 2016a, 2016b), creating more transparency in the basic information offered to the visitor through museum labels and catalogues is ethically critical.

A further problem with many museum labels is that they point the visitor to a single moment in the life of the object, somewhere in its ancient past, usually either the approximate period of manufacture, or the moment of its deposition. When the archaeological findspot, or provenience, is known, it is typically listed on the label – for example, the tomb in Italy where the object was placed. When the provenience is not known and curators or scholars use a 'connoisseurial' approach to determine an object's origin through comparative study, the conclusion might point to the place of manufacture, object's use, or its deposition. Rarely does a label discuss which point in the ancient life of an object has been highlighted, and why.

Later moments in the life of the object may be alluded to on a label through a provenance listing. For example, in the case study presented below, the label reads, 'Fonds Fernand Mayence,' indicating that it is from the Mayence collection. As will be made clear, the situation is far more complicated than the object arriving as a result of a single donation. The inclusion of information about provenance is arguably for the benefit of the donor, to receive proper credit for the gift, and for the museum, to credit donors publicly, rather than for the benefit of the visitor, for whom such label information provides very little context about the object.

By contrast, an object biography encourages the investigation of the early contexts of a work and the study of its more recent history, in other words, how people in modern times have created their own relationship(s) to the piece (Alberti 2005; Costello et al. 2021; Drazin 2020; Kopytoff 1986). In the museum, antiquities are typically presented in a case or on a podium, similar to fine art objects. A visitor may understand that if one wishes to own art, it can be bought in a gallery, from an artist, or through an auction house. The sale of ethnographic collections and antiquities, however, may be subject to complex legal and ethical challenges. If a museum fails to acknowledge how such objects were acquired, visitors are left with the false impression that ethnographic and archaeological objects are treated no different than other art objects: they are perceived as commodities, intended for exhibition, freely purchased by those with the means to do so. The equation of the sale of ethnographic and archaeological objects with the sale of art objects is a betrayal of the museum's mission to provide proper stewardship of its collections and to educate the public.

The omission of the modern life of the artefact from a museum display not only glosses over the means by which the museum acquired it, but fails to address the destructive way in which the unearthing of many objects takes place. One aspect of this is the damage wrought by looters seeking archaeological objects to sell on the art market, but equally significant is the impact of archaeological work and the displacement of local heritage on communities. Such ethical issues cannot be ignored by museums. The display of an object, therefore, should acknowledge multiple aspects of the object biography that are not currently part of the common museum label: what is known and not known about an object's place of origin and date of manufacture or deposition; the means through which it likely resurfaced; and how it entered the collection. The inclusion of detail relating to the full life of the artefact helps to mitigate the detached character of museum display and the ethical issues of failing to present an object's full story. Furthermore, such an approach to display is more effective at engaging visitors.

The stories of objects' human entanglements in antiquity and in more recent times, their journeys from the ground to the museum case, are dynamic, multifaceted biographies that can take a visitor far beyond the static, limited facts of a standard museum label. While museums tend to focus on a single moment from an object's past, visitors might be equally interested in where the artefact was found, who found it, or how it came to be displayed in a museum in their city. Moreover, such information may be known, unlike the point of origin. Instead of viewing elements of the story as sources of shame – for example, a collector from the past who wrongly purchased objects that had been looted – the story, openly acknowledged, can be adopted as an interesting and important part of the history of the object and of the institution.

There are, of course, limits to what can fit on a wall label; the full biography of an object might be shared through the museum's website, via audio guide and tablets, or through docents and other means, all of which help to tell richer stories.[8] Given the constraints typical of museum labels, we have focused below on interventions that are concise: the addition of a provocative question or sensory experience, the introduction of an evocative image, or the alteration of a display to reconstruct a context from the object's life. One value of the object biography approach is that it allows multiple points of entry into the moments of an object's history. Each of these snippets of information on a typical museum label, however minute and uncertain, belies a great deal of knowledge, research and comparative analysis carried out by museum staff, community members and scholars. We use the museum label as a starting point for offering richer forms of storytelling.

Case study

In seeking a case study through which to explore the possibilities of object biography in museum display, we were intrigued by tiny bronze objects from the ancient Mediterranean at Musée L. The labels for these objects suggest many moments missing from their biographies. These objects and their associated lacunas are common to many museums (Langdon 2021), posing an appealing challenge: how could they be presented in a captivating way when so much of their story remains uncertain? For many visitors, the bronzes are already interesting just by virtue of being ancient. Others are attracted to the recognizable representations of human and animal figures.

The current display of ancient bronzes at Musée L incorporates twenty one figurines from different cultures of the ancient Mediterranean (fig.2). They are shown against a simple black background. Numbers below the figures correspond to a placard on the left, which includes basic 'tombstone' information for each figure to the extent that it is known. Question marks and statements of 'provenance inconnue' highlight the lacunas in knowledge. With few other indications of an object's history, these labels are the only medium that enables visitors to understand the objects. Some bronzes appear to depict well-known figures from myth, such as Herakles. In such cases, telling an interesting story about the object is easier; the museum provides a longer, 'chat' label discussing Herakles's significance and recognizable attributes, such as his lion pelt and club.

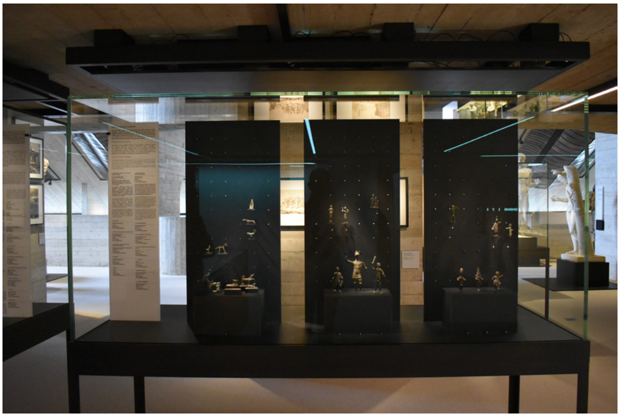

Figure 2. Display of bronzes from antiquity in the permanent exhibition of the Musée L. Photo taken by the authors on 4 October 2019.

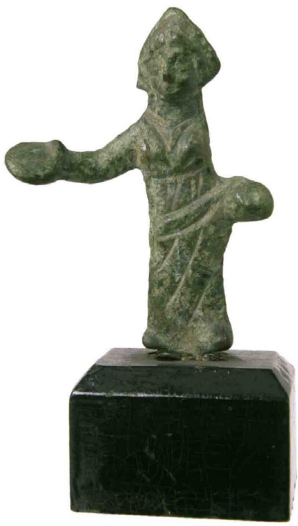

Figure 3. Bronze figurine of a woman making an offering, Musée L, Fonds Mayence, n° inv. FM 439. © Photo : Musée L – Jean-Pierre Bougnet.

Not all bronze pieces offer this level of immediacy. The example we present offers some affinities to more well-known items, as discussed below, but does not depict a recognizable character from mythology, nor does it bear the eye-catching features of the bronzes displayed with it, such as a weapon or an enlarged phallus. Instead, the figure (FM 439; fig.3) is a tiny image of a woman, flat and lacking in naturalistic detail. The figure is five centimeters in height, facing forward, adorned with a pedimented headdress; it wears a long robe that covers her feet; and incisions across the body indicate how the cloth is draped, dropping at the collarbone and swathed over the lower left arm, which is held at hip height. Her left hand clasps an incense box, identified as an *acerra*; her right arm is held horizontally away from her body, with a slight crook in the elbow. In her right hand, she holds a shallow bowl or plate without feet or handles, which is identified as a *patera*, a ceramic vessel used for libations (Scarpellini 2013: 1027-28). Her body is held upright, with movement suggested only by the carved lines of her garments. From the side, the figurine appears almost flat, the only volume being provided by her head, bosom, feet and hands. A tang extends down from her feet suggesting she was originally mounted on a base.

10. Porteuse d'offrandes avec patère dans la main

Italie (?)
2e - 1er s. Av. J.-C.
Bronze
Nº inv. FM439
Fonds Fernand Mayence

This statue is labelled 'Porteuse d'offrandes avec patère dans la main' ('Woman Making an Offering, Holding a Patera').[9] The title is intentionally vague, failing to identify the woman as a priestess since her identity as such is not clearly indicated. The reference to a *patera,* or shallow, round vessel is written in scholarly language. That, along with the 'Italy (?)' on the label, is the result of connoisseurial studies on the object by university and museum staff members.[10] The patera is an Etruscan offering vessel, pointing to a religious context, in which an offering is made to a god or gods. The identification of the object as Etruscan is reasonable based on its characteristics. Unfortunately, without knowing the provenience, and with no scientific way to prove the antiquity of the piece, we cannot know for certain that it is not a modern forgery (Underwood 2014).

On a basic level, the label serves its purpose. It is succinct, provides identification, and indicates how the museum categorizes its collections. However, the absence of an indication of how conclusions were drawn, disproportionately highlights the unknown aspects of antiquity. Does the information serve visitors? What pathways towards participation are being opened through these labels? If interpretive texts serve as doorways to different viewpoints on collections, then the current model provides only a narrow scope for interpretive action, because it is formulated in a voice of curatorial authority. There is increasing pressure to change this model following a pivot in the sector towards a more visitor-oriented museum practice. This is partly pragmatic, given that museums around the world are engaged in a struggle for resources and funding, but it is also an ethical one, tied to a growing recognition of the importance of multivocality in museum practice. By implementing a critical and more encompassing approach to object biography, a museum can broaden the narratives that might be highlighted and the voices that can be involved in exploring them.

Approaches

The question is how this can be accomplished in practice. An obvious answer is to change the label; however, this is not a simple act. Or at least it should not be simple. Changing the label necessitates a rethinking of the display's narrative and its place within the museum. Although labels should make sense on their own, they do not have to exist in isolation. Labels are most effective when they consider museum practices as a whole, including other forms of visitor engagement. Museums often limit themselves to particular label styles or approaches based on the genres of their collections, but objects often exist across various categorizations, requiring a consideration of alternate meanings and display possibilities. This process allows us to imagine connections to other displays and fields of practice. Incorporating different voices and backgrounds can stand at the very centre of a museum's mission. Moreover, when labels are part of a wider dialogue, they open interesting formats for storytelling. The object becomes a participant in this dialogue, with its own biography and relationships that can be explored. Using the example of the bronze figurine, we will offer examples of how this could be done.

As a university museum with a public mandate, Musée L's mission is a combination of sparking curiosity and evoking emotion (Querinjean 2021). Its wide array of collections means that the museum isn't trying to teach visitors about one subject, but rather to engage with life in the broadest sense. This requires expertise across diverse subjects and the ability to craft complex narratives about the relationships between people and objects. In short, we can draw inspiration from across other galleries and disciplines in handling the display of our little figurine, and this means we can engage with antiquity in myriad ways.

1. Material

At the moment, the object's label transfers a limited amount of information very directly, but there is a noticeable lack of dialogue to engage the reader. A more interactive approach is possible through examination of the details of the object's biography. Its provenience is unknown, but the technology used in its manufacture is well understood. Expanding the description of the object's material on the label can open up a conversation about the technology used to create the figurine, and thus share grounded information with the visitor rather than points of conjecture. In this case, the bronze object was made using the lost wax method. Additional cold work was completed to add details to the face and clothing. These carved elements remain clear even after other features have eroded over time. A close parallel can be found at the Harvard Art Museum (inv. no. 1920.44.152; fig.4); the strong similarity suggests that the objects may have been made with the same mold or in the same workshop.

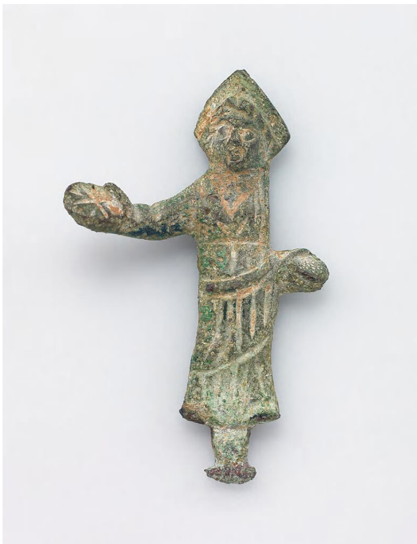

Figure 4. Bronze figurine of a woman making an offering, Harvard Art Museums, Gift of the Misses Norton,1920.44.152.

Bringing this aspect of the figurine's biography to life could be as simple as adding a 'chat' label, consisting of a short expansion upon an object label, or a 'group chat' label that addresses an aspect of several artefacts (Serrell 2015: 35). This label could take the form of a description of the bronze working process, but as audience research has demonstrated, long technical labels do not foster engagement with audiences. However, attempts to shorten these technical descriptions can come across as paternalistic.

One possibility is a text that allows a visitor to be transported to the moment when the object was made, evoking sensory experiences such as the malleability of the clay used to develop the mold, the heat of the furnace in which the bronze was melted, the excitement of opening up the mold to see the object inside, or the sound of the metal tool scraping against the surface of the figurine. These sensory evocations provide information about the past, creating a connection that goes beyond analytical or technical descriptions into the territory of embodied understanding. Videos or photos featuring modern artisans or archaeologists experimenting with metallurgy and bronze molding techniques could further help to immerse the visitor in the process of the object's creation.

Such an approach to interpretation would bridge millennia by connecting the figurine with a shared human experience; moreover, the approach can easily be replicated across other display cases featuring a different material. A more targeted intervention could involve a reconstruction of the type of mold used to create the figurine and other tools used in the process, again evoking the presence of the creator.

Other areas of the museum offer inspiration for a more interactive form of presentation. Beside the antiquity collection is situated one of the museum's 'TechnoLabs' – spaces in which visitors are invited to explore artistic techniques through touch as well as sight. This particular TechnoLab focuses on the tactile display of sculptural techniques used with a variety of materials and tools. This display is currently kept apart from the rest of the exhibition, but a closer relationship could be created through direct references in the labeling. Icons could be used to indicate certain techniques, such as the lost wax method. This would allow connections to be made across the museum's collections, augmenting the stories of artefacts with additional context.

2. Use

Not only are the figurines on display made from the same material, but it appears that they shared a similar function during the period of antiquity. The cultural context for bronze statuettes and the votive practices in which they were used are highlighted in a 'group chat' label:

> Like terracotta figurines, small figurative bronze sculptures usually had a religious value: they too were used as votive or funerary offerings. Their production bears witness to the exchange of ideas and the cultural influences that abounded at the time. Abandoned by the Greeks in the 5th century BC, the practice of making bronze statuettes was thereafter mainly the preserve of the Italics, the Etruscans and later the Romans.

This text elucidates part of the figurine's biography, placing it in a centuries-long tradition of making offerings of bronze objects at sanctuaries. The intrinsic value of the bronze made such an offering an appropriate tithe for a god, although as the label indicates, votives of other materials were also common.

Despite the value of the material from which it is made, the figurine type, with its schematic style and flat form, is often compared unfavorably to naturalistic, fully modelled versions that are arguably of higher quality (see fig.57.2 in Scarpellini 2013: 1028). During the Hellenistic period of the third- to late first-century B.C.E. when this figurine was likely manufactured, there were many types of votive. The ways in which votives are presented in museums today, however, privilege the individual object as a form of 'fine art' which excludes our small inconspicuous bronze. By contrast, an object biography approach encourages viewers to see the piece not simply as an artwork in a museum or a relic of the past; instead, they can conceptualize the work as an object that was active in the past through its entanglements with people and places.

Jessica Hughes highlights the value of object biographies for votives, given that they are 'small and inherently mobile items' (Hughes 2016: 23). Their mobility allows for a type of storytelling in which the visitor can walk in the shoes of the supplicant. As the figurine is not inscribed, and the sanctuary from which it was removed is unknown, the reason for its dedication is not clear, but that does not mean that empathy is impossible. A 'chat' label could describe the supplicant's experience searching for an appropriate votive, taking it to the sanctuary, and placing it on an altar or before the statue of a god beside other votives.

This would foreground the relationship between the object, the giver, and the deity that is forged through the act of dedication.

A more labour-intensive intervention could be a reconstruction of a sanctuary with a stone altar incised to allow the insertion of standing bronze votives (Scarpellini 2013: 1026); or alternatively the reconstruction of the *favisae*, the pits into which votives were ceremonially deposited to make way for new material (Hackens 1963). Such a display would highlight the tension between the individual's experience of votive dedication and the anonymity of this individual within the collective assemblage.

The display could create dialogues across the antiquity collection by including other materials, such as terracotta objects from the neighbouring vitrine. Beyond that, a comparison to offering practices from other cultures could be imagined by drawing upon the museum's vast collection of religious objects. This kind of juxtaposition would spur the question of how offering a bronze figurine might be similar, or different, from placing a candle in a church, or laying food upon an ancestral altar. Such questions activate curiosity and discussion: parallels made with present-day practice incentivize visitors to consider the object within a context of active use.

3. User

Looking more closely at the label, we notice that the object is gendered. The figurine depicts a *porteuse* rather than a *porteur*. Since the female votive figure is displayed with a range of representations, including a type that can be assumed to be male based on its clothing, it could be surmised that a female figure was likely an offering made by or for a woman. Thus the label gives us a potential glimpse at another aspect of the object's biography – its user.

Several votives have been found inscribed with women's names, which supports the suggestion that females participated in cults not only in the household but in public (see, for example, Scarpellini 2013: 1033). Etruscan funerary customs and banqueting scenes show women alongside men, in contrast to Greek traditions where the two genders are clearly separated. This provides another important clue. The figurine's small size, schematic quality and flat form are suggestive of mass production rather than a special commission. This is supported by the existence of the direct parallel in the Harvard collection. Several examples from this same period possess more elaborate craftwork and potential personalization, particularly those identified as originating from the Sanctuary of Diana at Nemi.[11] These differences could point to the object's use by a woman without the capital to purchase a more personalized or refined item.

Despite this generic appearance, such items would have carried a special meaning for their users as publicly displayed personal items embodying communication with a deity. Stephanie Langin-Hooper describes such figurines as actors in a social negotiation process (Langin-Hooper 2015). There is an entanglement of agency here in which the owner hopes to affect the world through the figurine, creating not so much a one-way transaction but rather a three-way relationship, between and among the owner, the figurine, and the deity (Knappett 2005). The votives do not just represent their absent owners, but mediate an ongoing interaction, an act of offering that continues through the very presence of the votive. The choice of offering a votive that depicts a woman pouring a libation is interesting in this context. It does not represent a particular body part that needs healing, or an animal that could be owned, both types being present in the Etruscan-Hellenic corpus of figurines. It does not represent an item the user desires, but rather an abbreviated ritual action – a sign of piety.

The Hellenistic period saw an explosion in votive types, meaning that individuals could tailor their choice of offering. The specific type represented by this figure, the 'Hellenistic worshipper' (Pavia 2020), is described as a mainstay of the central Italian tradition in the face of increasing Romanization represented by fragmented and anatomical votives. This brings up an interesting question: could the user have intended their choice as an overt symbol of their own cultural identity, or were they just following local tradition? Such questions invite contemplation and trigger debate, especially when parallels are drawn to visitors' lives: does a Che Guevara t-shirt, for example, have to convey an politically activist message, or can it just be worn according to fashion trends? By asking such questions through a chat label, staff would not mislead or confuse visitors with their lack of answers, as typical of a traditional label; they could inspire visitors to find their own responses.

4. Provenance

As the artefact was not excavated in any formal setting, it lacks provenience. However, elements of its provenance can be reconstructed. The inventory number, FM439, points to one small part of its chain of ownership since its removal from an unknown context. This inventory number indicates that it was included in the collection of the archaeologist Fernand Mayence (1879 - 1959) while he was teaching at the university between 1907 and 1950. During this time, Mayence made numerous visits to antiquities markets across Rome, Florence, Athens, Rhodes, Cairo and Beirut. On occasion, he reported to his superiors about his purchases to augment the university's collection. He also created an extensive network of colleagues and students who donated their own acquisitions to his budding classical archaeology museum. The figurine must be situated within such a context. A trip to the archives helps to elucidate this part of the object's history. Photos taken before the figurine's re-display in 2017 show that it was originally mounted on a small black cube, a typical addition made by antiquarians selling artefacts to European collectors. A similar base can be found on a small flat bronze male figurine identified as an *offrand* (AC 184; fig.5), donated by the abbot Albert Zech (1950 - 1989). Zech was a former student of Fernand Mayence who had been inspired by the latter's classes to undertake several trips to archaeological sites in the Mediterranean, and to set up a modest collection of his own. The similarity of the two figurines reinforces the popularity of these types of objects in the twentieth-century antiquity market and may even suggest that Albert Zech intentionally bought pieces on the Italian or Belgian antiquities market that complemented the material he had seen in the university collection during his studies. This idea is reinforced in a letter in which he expresses a desire for his collection to join Mayence's classical antiquities upon his death.

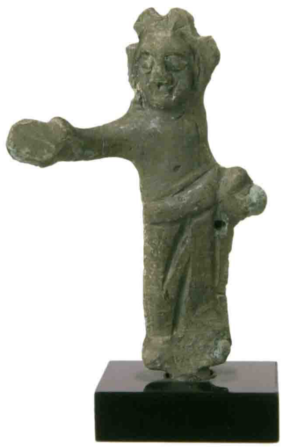

Figure 5: Bronze figurine of a man making an offering, Musée L, Donation of Albert Zech, n° inv. AC 184. © Photo : Musée L – Jean-Pierre Bougnet.

Despite providing a key point of discussion for researchers and heritage professionals, the role of the antiquities market remains an under-represented aspect of the display of archaeological collections. The important work carried out by provenance researchers could be presented by the inclusion of archival documents such as travel journals, photographs or receipts alongside artefacts. These would provide more transparency into the ethics of how objects are collected and how researchers reconstruct this dimension of their histories. Networks of collectors could be visually represented through static or interactive maps. These would provide an accessible avenue for exploring the interplay of cultural capital and geopolitical power dynamics. They could even be linked to present-day debates about restitution and ownership. Labels could also include questions about how this unregulated form of collecting without documented evidence of excavation detracts from our knowledge about artefacts and the people for whom they once held meaning.

Another way to explore the story of the figurine would be to display it within the context for which it was acquired. The top floor of the museum is dedicated to a single collector, Charles Delsemme. The juxtaposition of works in a display reminiscent of the collector's own home and the use of quotations from the author in the text panels underscores Delsemme's interest in dialogues that extend across varying artistic forms, periods and traditions. Mayence's collecting was motivated by a different desire, a desire to create a resource for teaching history and archaeology. However, a re-display could start from the same principles by evoking the classroom through photographs and quotations on labels, or even by re-displaying objects within a table case that could be a point of convergence for school and university groups, and thus bring this part of the object's history to life. A reference could also be made to the impact of lessons based on these objects on students such as Albert Zech, whose archives and collections made a major contribution to the legacy of objects such as our bronze figurine.

Conclusion

Each object and display within a museum tells multi-faceted stories. We feel passionately that more diverse and interdisciplinary strategies should be mobilized to challenge conventional narratives and reinterpret a museum collection as a rich and powerful repository of stories and memories. A collection offers a record of sometimes challenging histories that need to be acknowledged and redressed, but also functions as a contemporary, living body of works, each capable of forging new connections and meanings for visitors.

The object label is the initial, and often the only, point of didactic engagement between curator, object, and visitor. Ancient artefacts are regularly labeled according to museum-industry standards, which typically follow principles more suited to modern fine art objects, including the name of the artist, title, date, location of creation, and brief details of provenance. Those details, however, are often unknown for ancient works, and their inclusion on a label can be vague or misleading. The standard label is not well suited to ancient objects, which would benefit more from an object biography approach to interpretation.

We do not suggest that every object should be accompanied by a label that explores its full biography. We advocate for a more honest account of facts and their sources, as well as information relating to provenance and provenience. Beyond that, we propose several approaches that would engage the visitor with a moment in the object's biography, in contrast to the *unknown* typically referred to on the label. Museum spaces and resources do not accommodate extensive labels for each object. However, different aspects of the biography could be highlighted for each object in a short label, image or installation, based on what information is known about the work, and which story would be most engaging. We use the label as a starting point, rather than a stopping point, offering several ways in which the object could be displayed, drawing upon different moments in its biography. Potential subjects for storytelling, such as the properties of ancient materials, gender roles in antiquity, historical religious practices, and collecting histories, are already referenced on labels. By changing what information is privileged, museums can tell more engaging stories. Any attempt to rethink the framing of a label text must be integrated into wider museum practice. This involves calling into question the categorization and annotation of databases, acquisition policies that still prioritize form over narrative, and the manner in which the voice of curatorial authority that is glorified over the skills and knowledge of other museum personnel.[12]

Object biographies are rarely complete, and little is gained from glossing over what is not known. Missing information can be shared through stories that highlight the ethical problems of past collecting practices, rather than through the elision of a question mark. At the same time, what information is known can be highlighted through more engaging, dialogic displays.

Notes

[1] The authors thank the Institute for Civilizations, Arts and Letters (INCAL) at UCLouvain for providing funding to enable our collaboration. We also thank the staff at Musée L for accommodating our work and for the support they have provided for this project.

[2] Though object labels in the display cases are only available in French, the museum's 'chat' labels and all exhibition booklets in the permanent collection are provided in French, Dutch and English.

[3] The authors do not condone the display of materials procured through illegal means or contexts of violence. There is a great deal of discussion in the field at the moment regarding what is ethical to display. Opinions range from the belief that all materials need to be accessible to the public regardless of their provenance, to the belief that no material excavated abroad should be on display outside its original context. The critical and practical approach to displaying archaeological material outlined in this article should follow from a robust acquisitions policy that considers the ethics of collecting and display. See Sarah Van Beurden et al., 'Ethical Principles for the Management of Colonial Collections in Belgium', Restitution Belgium 2021. https://restitutionbelgium.be/en/report.

[4] Wayne Modest, 'Words Matter', Research Center for Material Culture, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam 2018. https://www.materialculture.nl/en/events/words-matter

[5] Provenience is the location where an object is found, identified in three-dimensional space through scientific excavation or survey. This is distinct from provenance, the object's chain of ownership (Joyce 2012; Gerstenblith 2020).

[6] See also relevant sections on the history of the collections in Van den Driessche and Druart (2020).

[7] Marlowe suggests that such a stylistic attribution does not belong in the 'tombstone' section at all, but rather in the 'chat,' the longer portion of the label that discusses the object (Marlowe 2016a: 223).

[8] The reinstallation of the galleries dedicated to Greece, Rome and Byzantium at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, provides examples of these varied approaches, which are discussed by the curators in this interview: https://the-past.com/review/whats-on/athens-of-america-an-interview-with-its-curators/

[9] Author's translation.

[10] Initial identifications of artefact types at Musée L are often carried out in house through a literature review. However, the museum regularly collaborates with experts to review its collections and confirm the categories assigned by the staff. Most recently, the antiquity collection was reviewed by Musée royal de Mariemont curator Nicolas Amoroso.

[11] See BM 1921,0512.1; 1955,0501.1; 1913,0529.1. These objects were bought on the market and have been identified as coming from the site through comparisons with similar objects found during later excavations. See also De Ridder (1913: 59); Comstock and Vermeule (1971: 178); and Haynes (1960).

[12] For example, the Penn Museum has hired refugees from the Middle East, Africa and Central America as docents in their archaeology galleries. They share their experiences to illuminate the uses and meanings of objects and images (Ulaby 2020).

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