



Collections Analysis Collaborative:
Arts of the Ancient Mediterranean at the
Menil

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Project Description

The Collections Analysis Collaborative (CAC) is a research and educational initiative developed by John Hopkins (Rice University), Paul R. Davis (The Menil Collection), and Sarah Kiehl Costello (University of Houston - Clear Lake) to generate a rich, historical understanding of nearly 600 objects from the ancient Mediterranean, housed in the Menil Collection. A unique collaboration between key Houston cultural and educational institutions, the project brings together affiliated students, art historians, archaeologists, and museum professionals to identify innovative approaches that address contemporary issues of cultural heritage, provenance, object-based research, collecting practices, and public display that shape the efficacy of museums' permanent collections and prospective acquisitions. By fostering ongoing, open dialogue between scholarly communities with diverse perspectives, the project will establish new models for proactive, dynamic collaboration in the world of antiquities collecting and collection maintenance. The project will also strengthen the Menil's institutional capacity to uphold the ethical standards for the research, collection, publication, and display of ancient objects, established by UNESCO, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), and the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR).

Background

European and American collections of antiquities often manifest complicated acquisition histories that include political relationships with other nations, fieldwork and excavations, purchases from art dealers and auction houses, and gifts to institutions from collectors and patrons. An object's aesthetic and cultural significance and its perceived authenticity have often superseded its documented provenance, provenience, and the circumstances through which collectors acquired it. Following the ratification of UNESCO's 1970 convention on the import, export and transfer of cultural property, and the 1983 Cultural Properties Implementation Act (CPIA), the political and ethical contexts of past practices are no longer tenable. This creates a complex situation for both established and growing collections.

Numerous laws, international agreements, and institutional guidelines established by government commissions, scholars, museum professionals, and cultural heritage specialists have sought to resolve these issues and to preserve historical and archaeological contexts by requiring documentation of an object's provenance and more thorough examination of provenance records. Academic and professional organizations have also established guidelines for the publication, display, study and transfer of these objects. As the primary forum for public discourse on art, museums and their role in society, the AAMD has developed guidelines for the acquisition of archaeological material and ancient art. In 2013, the AAMD amended its 2008 guidelines on the acquisition of archaeological material to strengthen collaboration among institutions and to encourage a more rigorous analysis of acquisitions. In 2015, the AAMD developed protocols for providing safe havens for works of cultural and historical significance located in countries in crisis. Together, the regulations serve the vital purpose of safeguarding human cultural history by reinforcing the ban on unlawful trade and export, discouraging the acquisition of objects without provenance, and providing recourse for the return of objects when necessary. Primarily focused on new acquisitions of archaeological material and ancient art, these regulations largely overlook existing collections of ancient objects, which are also implicated in the current debates over the commodification of cultural history.

Museums and other cultural institutions with collections sensitive to these issues have responded to national and international regulations and guidelines in different ways. A few continue to acquire and display objects of questionable ethical and legal status. Some have removed objects from public display

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and consideration until there is a clear and secure way forward. Others have initiated collection-based provenance projects, relinquished legal title, and returned objects to institutions in their countries of origin (often under public and political pressure). Still others have worked proactively with foreign institutions and governments to develop mutually beneficial arrangements, such as shared title and long-term loan exchanges

Each of these paths opens an institution to risk and cost. Provenance research is rarely the focus of funding, often because cultural institutions are strapped for resources. Furthermore, the contemporary issues raised by long and sometimes sordid histories of collecting are complex and unresolved. We believe the divisive standoff between art dealers, collectors, museum professionals, and academics is detrimental to the identification of new approaches that would equitably address these concerns. One purpose of the CAC is to search for a practicable way forward, through collaborative, open research and discussion. The Menil Collection offers a distinctive opportunity for scholars and students to investigate provenance, object biography, collecting practices and the ethics of display and scholarly publication. As a museum and research institution, the Menil is internationally recognized for its proactive stewardship of antiquities. The conservation and return of the Byzantine Frescos in 2012 is one recent example. Moreover, the museum provides researchers with extraordinary access to works of art and archival records. Bringing together local and international specialists with students from the Houston area to conduct object-based research on the Menil's collection of art from the ancient Mediterranean, the CAC will provide a working prototype for museums and universities to openly examine and address these issues together.

Background to the Collection

In contrast to many prominent older European and American collections, the Menil's permanent collection of ancient art from the Mediterranean was acquired entirely during the middle and late twentieth century. Founders John and Dominique de Menil started collecting art from the ancient Mediterranean in the late 1940s and acquired most of the collection between the 1950s and 1970s. Dominique de Menil, who in 1964 referred to herself as a "frustrated archaeologist," was the principal force behind the formation of that part of the collection. During the same period, they also began actively collecting art from Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the ancient Americas. While expanding their interests beyond European and American modernism, these areas of collecting were an integral part of the de Menils' commitments to the University of St. Thomas. In 1959, the de Menils founded and staffed the department of art history and utilized their growing private collection to enrich students' university art education. Referring to their collection as "the teaching collection," the trajectory of the de Menil's acquisitions was therefore intimately intertwined with the development of exhibitions, the scholarly and educational needs of university students and professors, and the enhancement of civic life in Houston.

Several small exhibitions during the late 1950s and 1960s curated by Jermayne Macagy at the Contemporary Arts Museum and University of St. Thomas were the first to feature objects from the growing collection. *Ten Centuries that Shaped the West: Greek and Roman Art in Texas Collections* was the first exhibition to catalogue and present the majority of the collection to a wide public. Spearheaded by Dominique de Menil and Herbert Hoffmann, the exhibition opened at the Institute for the Arts at Rice University in October 1970, and it traveled to the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts and the Witte Memorial Museum in San Antonio. Although acquisition slowed after the passing of John de Menil in 1973, the collection of art from the ancient Mediterranean continued to grow until Dominique de Menil passed in 1997. Today, the gallery of art from the ancient Mediterranean has changed little from its original installation by Mrs. de Menil for the Menil Collection's opening in 1987.

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Project Components

The CAC project consists of several overlapping components to facilitate engagement with the Menil Collection's holdings of art from the ancient Mediterranean and increase open dialogue between participants.

1. CAC Research Website

- The CAC website will be the primary point of access and distribution for the project's object-based research. Rice University will host the website (cac.rice.edu), which will provide public access to the project's object database, catalogue, and journal.
- The database and catalogue will follow the guidelines of the [Categories for the Description of Works of Art \(CDWA\)](#) and [Getty Vocabularies](#) in order to uphold best professional practices of cataloguing museum collections and facilitate future integration with the Menil's museum catalogue database. Project leaders will oversee and approve object-based research by students enrolled in the Rice HART 312/540 course (see below) as well as by project specialists and invited scholars.
- The journal will consist of two parts: an online conversation that will be updated continuously and include remarks, findings and points of interest uncovered during research by students and affiliated scholars; and the publication of short, peer-reviewed articles that probe major questions that the project uncovers.

2. Rice University Course

- Students enrolled in the Rice HART 312/540 course will conduct preliminary object-based research (including provenance and social historical investigation) on the objects in the Menil's collections of art from the ancient Mediterranean. Their research reports and updates will be added to the CAC website following review by participating scholars.
- Undergraduate students will also learn about the practices of research in a museum environment and develop an understanding of curatorial issues facing such collections.
- Graduate students will participate in advanced object-based research.

3. Conference

- A three-day conference and workshop in October 2016 will provide a venue for participating specialists to present research on the primary branches of the collection and identify areas of interest or concern.
- In the evening of day 1, a keynote speaker will reflect on the issues facing the discipline and collections like the Menil's. Day 2 of the conference will feature one speaker each on Egyptian, Late Bronze/Early Iron Age, Pre-Classical Greek, Greek vases, Hellenistic Ceramics, and on the partnerships between academic institutions and antiquities collections. Their formal talks are intended to spark discussion about issues of object biography, provenance, display and the curation of the Menil's antiquities and will be a crucial locus of discussion regarding reinstallation of the collection (see below, 7).
- A workshop discussion at Rice University on Day 3 of the conference will consider the talks from the previous day and will include experts in provenance research and cultural heritage issues.

4. Symposia, Online Conversations, and Seminars

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- In addition to this central conference, the CAC project is punctuated by online conversations with international scholars, multiple symposia, and special seminars by visiting scholars. These different events will contribute to the evolving conversations and observations featured on the CAC website.
5. Publication
 - A publication of the research outputs presented at the conference and in special seminars is intended to serve as a reference point for scholars and museums with similar concerns, interests and collections. This is anticipated to be a print volume edited by the project directors.
 6. Integration of Research
 - A key part of the CAC project is the integration of new research into the Menil's existing museum database catalogue and object files. Working with the Menil's database administrator, new research generated by the CAC project will be incorporated so that future study of the collection is performed with the thorough records that result from this project.
 7. Reinstallation of Gallery
 - A reinstallation of the Menil's gallery of art from the ancient Mediterranean will integrate new research generated by the CAC project.

Project Schedule

14 April 2015

CAC Inaugural Symposium
Rice University

An inaugural symposium for the CAC sponsored by the Ancient Mediterranean Civilizations Program at Rice University. Project participants presented initial reports on their research into the Menil's collection of art from the ancient Mediterranean.

- "Looking Back, Looking Forward. Art from the Ancient Mediterranean at the Menil Collection." Dr. Paul Davis, Curator of Collections, The Menil Collection
- "Object Biography. Chronicling the Life of a Votive Statue from Antiquity to the Present." Dr. Sarah Costello, Assistant Professor, University of Houston - Clear Lake
- "Monsters for Life and Afterlife. Griffins at the Menil Collection." Dr. Nassos Papalexandrou, Associate Professor, The University of Texas - Austin

August 2015–December 2015

- Construction of CAC website; creation of digital object database; consolidation of Menil registrar and CAC project research protocols
- Confirmation of CAC Conference speakers and identification of provenance specialists for workshop
- Research and collaborative meetings with provenance curators at Getty Villa and MFA Boston
- Planning and preparation for joint Rice-Menil course

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January–September 2016

- Website soft launch projected for January 2016
- 11 January 2016, Rice University Course HART 312/540, “Advanced Study in Museums and Heritage: The Arts of the Ancient Mediterranean at the Menil” (Spring 2016), Tuesday and Thursday (course ends 4 May 2016), Prof. John Hopkins. Taught annually.
- Press announcement of CAC Project.
- Research entries begin to populate the CAC website catalogue
- In preparation for the CAC conference in October 2016, “project specialists” will visit the Menil and study its collection of art from the ancient Mediterranean. Project specialists will have access to Menil objects, object files, institutional archives, and staff to support their research. During their research visits, scholars may also participate in associated courses, lectures, and seminars at Rice University and University of Houston - Clear Lake.

October 2016

Conference at the Menil Collection and Rice University.

Monday, 17 October 2016

The Menil Collection, Foyer

- Evening keynote address to Menil circle, Rice students, faculty, interested scholars, followed by walk through gallery with speakers and public, then dinner.

Tuesday, 18 October 2016

The Menil Collection, Foyer

- Formal talks (three morning, three afternoon), open to Rice faculty, students, Menil circle, and interested scholars.

Wednesday, 19 October 2016

Rice University, Moody Arts Center

- Two-part workshop with speakers, curators, faculty and participating scholars and students. Purpose: discuss collections and ways forward with reinstallation/ renovation/ contested objects.

2016–2017

- Follow-up with speakers and planning for projected publication of conference.
- Periodic symposia, online conversations and seminars.
- Second Rice-Menil course (HART 312/540), spring 2017.
- Planning for projected reinstallation of Menil galleries.

2018 (Projected)

- Publication of 2016 conference proceedings edited by Costello, Davis and Hopkins.
- Reinstallation of the Ancient Mediterranean galleries, by Dr. Paul Davis with consulting curators, Hopkins and Costello.

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Project Funding

The project has been generously funded by four programs at Rice University

- The Humanities Research Center
- The Department of Art History
- The Program in Ancient Mediterranean Civilizations
- The Arts Initiative Fund

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Collection Analysis Collaborators

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Role: Project co-director

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Specialty: Near Eastern archaeology and art

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Carla M. Antonaccio

Professor, Duke University

Specialty: late Bronze and Iron Age Mediterranean Archaeology; archaeology of identity

Role: Collaborator and conference participant in provenance, cultural heritage and archaeology

Betsy Brian

Chair and Professor, Johns Hopkins University

Specialty: Egyptian art and archaeology

Role: Collaborator and conference participant in Egyptian art and archaeology

Jennifer Gates-Foster

Assistant Professor, The University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill

Specialty: Art and Archaeology of the Near East and Egypt in the Hellenistic and Roman

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periods

Role: Collaborator and conference participant in Hellenistic art and ceramics

Morag Kersel

Assistant Professor, DePaul University

Specialty: Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age of the eastern Mediterranean and Levant, cultural heritage protection

Role: Collaborator and conference participant in cultural heritage protection, ethics and practices

Susan Langdon

Professor and Department Chair, University of Missouri

Specialty: Greek art and archaeology

Role: Collaborator and conference participant in Geometric Greek and Aegean art and figurines

Nassos Papalexandrou

Associate Professor, The University of Texas – Austin

Specialty: Greek art and Archaeology; Near Eastern Art

Role: Collaborator, conference participant and original contributor in Pre-Classical Greek art

Victoria Reed

Sadler Curator of Provenance, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Specialty: provenance research and ethics

Role: Collaborator and conference participant in provenance research practices and ethics

C. Brian Rose

Chair and Professor, Curator, University of Pennsylvania

Specialty: Graeco-Persian, Roman archaeology and art

Role: Collaborator and conference keynote speaker in provenance, cultural heritage and Mediterranean archaeology

David Saunders

Associate Curator of Antiquities, The J. Paul Getty Museum

Specialty: Greek and Roman art and provenance research

Role: Project advisor and collaborator in provenance research initiatives and Greek art

Phoebe Segal

Assistant Curator, The Museum of Fine Arts Boston

Specialty: Greek and Roman art

Role: Collaborator and conference participant in Classical Greek vases and art