

Kenneth Sheedy  
Macquarie University

# Ancient coins for the colonies: Hellenism and the history of numismatic collections in Australia

In memory of Maria Varvaressos

## Abstract

This article has its origins in some reflections on an earlier era in a rather different world. But they do eventually lead to Australia and to the processes of globalization which are such a salient feature of contemporary life in Australia. Here I want to explore something of the creation of private collections of ancient Greek coins in Australia and their subsequent fate. At first glance this topic would appear to have a distinctly local ring to it, that perhaps jars with the theme of 'Hellenism in a Globalised World'. But the import of ancient Greek coins into Australia can be understood in terms of a long held European practice of collecting antiquities (and in particular coins), that was encouraged by Hellenism. In this context collections of ancient coins came to represent the acquisition of an education which privileged knowledge of the classical world (Bowen 1989). In the Renaissance, coins were collected as bearers of authentic (and securely dated) portraits and thus valued as a means of providing direct contact with the great men of antiquity (Haskell 1993; Weiss 1973; Stahl 2009). The vast numbers available meant that (in contrast to other sources of images – such as statues) coins could be collected by many people, and not only in Italy or Greece but throughout Europe.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Coins thus formed a medium by which knowledge of the ancient world was widely disseminated through many levels of (educated) European

society. With the formation of European national museums in the eighteenth century some of the largest royal and aristocratic coin collections passed into the public domain to serve the purposes of public education.<sup>2</sup> During the nineteenth century we can also see the emergence of auction houses and dealers catering for a demand in ancient coins from a wider public around the world whose standards of living, income and education had risen significantly after the Industrial Revolution.<sup>3</sup> The 'Hellenism' which promoted the focus on Greek material culture (as an aid to learning) is arguably in good part responsible for the current global distribution of ancient Greek coins (Clarke 1989).

The dispersal of ancient Greek artefacts is hardly a modern (or Renaissance) phenomenon; it was already underway with the spread of Greek colonists around the Mediterranean, especially during the Hellenistic period (late 4<sup>th</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC), and reached untold heights with the Roman conquests. The import of items of Greek culture was common to many western countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they built up the resources of their museums and institutions of learning, and this has been well documented (Jenkins 1992). The processes involved in the transfer of ancient objects might today be described as global – and here I refer to the on-going movement of objects, sometimes on a massive scale, from one community to the private homes and state institutions of another. This has gone on over the centuries and now is worldwide.

We tend to think of the trade in antiquities as being responsible for this circulation but we should not forget the transfer of property held by refugees and migrants. In this article, I plan to focus on the private experience, for Australia's early museums were relatively few and (with one exception) their interest in antiquities was negligible. The creation of collections of ancient Greek coins in Australia reflects the colonial history of Australia – for it was a means by which the white settlers demonstrated and reproduced their ties with Europe. Hellenism in this context may also be linked to a distinctly English fascination with ancient Greece, having emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and then becoming a feature of an English public school education (Bowen 1989).

Ancient coins are the most common Greek antiquity in private hands around the world. They are the most common ancient artefacts in Australian museums. There are an estimated 3–4,000 Greek coins in Australian public

collections and until recently they were nearly all unpublished and very largely unknown.<sup>4</sup>

In an essay accompanying the catalogue of the 1992 exhibition *The First Collections. The Public Library and the National Gallery of Victoria in the 1850s and 1860s*, Ann Galbally noted that as colonial Australians had to establish, fund and maintain any public enterprise, such as a museum or library, ‘individual determination had to be unshakable, the collective desire needed to be strong and the participation rate high’ (Galbally 1992: 8). But the various forms this determined effort took in terms of public institutions and their policies took an unfortunate turn. A popular desire to make learning and knowledge available to all, in line with the democratic stirrings and the utilitarian belief in progress typical of the nineteenth century, led to the almost slavish following of what was considered the best of contemporary British approaches and models (Galbally 1992). Colonial art collectors, private and public, developed a ‘mania’ for copies (Inglis 1992a). It seemed everyone wanted their own copies of well-known British or European paintings and statues, and with these went a small tidal wave of replicas in the decorative arts, including coins (Inglis 1992b). Australian museums and libraries, if they were at all interested in ancient coins, were likely to purchase electrotypes of famous examples held in the British Museum rather than originals of lesser significance – Inglis (1992b) noted recommendations in the 1850s for the purchase of ‘sulphur casts’ by the Public Library of Melbourne. In this article I wish to look at four private collectors in Australia who took an interest in original Greek coins, and to suggest that each in their different ways represents a Hellenism that is recognizable in terms of trends evident elsewhere in the world.

### 1. J.J. Eugene von Guerard (1812–1901)

Johann Joseph Eugene von Guerard is best known today as a Viennese artist who produced some of the finest landscape paintings of colonial Australia. A modern survey of his life and work is now provided by the 2011 exhibition and catalogue essays from the National Gallery of Victoria, *Eugene von Guérard: Nature Revealed* (Pullin 2011b). After his training and early career as a painter in Italy and Germany von Guerard joined the gold rush in Victoria. He arrived in 1852 and went on to the goldfields at Ballarat but failed to make his fortune and soon returned to painting. Most of his subsequent

commissions came from wealthy property owners wanting paintings of their estates but he also found time to join exploratory expeditions organized by scientists and geologists, and in this context he recorded with great precision some of the most dramatic features of Australia's landscape, notably the Australian Alps and its highest peak, Mt Kosciuszko (Pullin 2011a). In 1870 he was appointed the first Master of Painting at the National School of Art, Melbourne, and Curator of the National Gallery of Victoria. Among his students were Frederick McCubbin (1855-1917) and Thomas (Tom) William (1856-1931). In 1871 he also became the first curator of the numismatic collection of the Victorian Public Library (Sharples 1986). As John Sharples (1986: 39) has noted in his history of this collection, while c Von Guerard was curator there he wrote a three volume catalogue of his own collection (unpublished); with Volume I given over to ancient Greek, Roman and Byzantine coins.<sup>5</sup> In 1881 von Guerard sold his coins to the Public Library of Victoria (Sharples 1986: 39). Sharples (1986: 40) has observed that with the addition of von Guerard's own coins the Library's collection was increased to a respectable total of 3,387 pieces (1171 were ancient).

Von Guerard began collecting coins before coming to Australia. But it also seems clear from his catalogue that most of his coins were acquired while in Australia (and in Melbourne). At least seven of the estimated nineteen non-Australian sources that he lists in these volumes are located in cities in Italy. A notable German source was the famous classical numismatist E. Julius Friedlander who became director of the Münzkabinett of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in 1868; this may well have been a personal contact.<sup>6</sup> Von Guerard arguably collected his Greek and Roman coins as original examples of ancient art. In a letter from his friend Thomas Duckett in 1867 von Guerard is said to have "gathered together coins that illustrate the art of every period" (Duckett 1867; Sharples 2011). The acquisition and study of ancient art was a common practice among European artists operating in Italy. One thinks here, for example, of the antiquities acquired by the famous Danish neo-classical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, whose fine collection of ancient coins is on exhibition in his museum in Copenhagen (Morkhølm 1982).<sup>7</sup>

Although usually modest in value, von Guerard's ancient coins evidently constitute the first collection of antiquities to reach the colonies. It was certainly the first collection to be recorded; though it was soon overtaken by the much more impressive antiquities collection of Charles Nicholson,

acquired during a grand tour in 1856–57 and presented to the University of Sydney in 1860; though, it seems to have held no coins.<sup>8</sup> Von Guerard's coins were probably among the first ancient Greek artefacts (if not the first) to be acquired by Victoria. It went against museum policy, which was to buy replicas. The early administrators of the library had been urged by Professor McCoy of Melbourne University to purchase 'sulphur casts of the great European collections of coins for historical study', and among the first purchases (10 April 1862) were casts of Roman coins (Inglis 1992b: 93). As noted above, the purchase of casts was a key trend in the nascent collections of the new colonies. Part of von Guerard's collection was put on exhibition in the library but it has remained unpublished. On reflection we can see that this early contact with ancient Greece was quickly buried and forgotten.

## 2. A.B. Triggs (1868–1936)

Arthur Bryant Triggs, a successful grazier, was born in London in 1868 and migrated to Sydney in 1887 (Walsh 1990; Ives 2003). After spending time from 1888 as an accountant with the Bank of New South Wales at its Yass branch he decided to go into pastoralism and investment on his own. He proceeded to purchase some 25 sheep stations, which held as many as half a million sheep at one time (Vivian and Noble 1985). In addition to sheep his great wealth enabled him to acquire collections of art, furniture, books, manuscripts, fine lace and coins (Ives 2003; Vivian and Noble 1985).<sup>9</sup> He wanted to open a Charles Dickens Museum in Yass, but struggled to get enough items (Ives 2003; Vivian and Noble 1985). Perhaps the best known work from Triggs' collection today is an 1881 painting of Helen of Troy by the distinguished Victorian artist Sir Edward John Poynter.<sup>10</sup> This fine example of late nineteenth century Hellenism now resides in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which purchased the painting after the death of Triggs and the auction of all but one of his collections at the request of his widow.<sup>11</sup> In a recent study Elizabeth Bollen has suggested that the jewellery worn by Helen in this painting be linked with jewellery found by Schliemann at Troy (and modelled by Sophia Schliemann in a famous photograph of these Bronze Age finds) (Bollen 2010).<sup>12</sup> At this point we might stop to reflect that Australia was without wealthy cultural benefactors until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; the first and greatest, Alfred Felton (benefactor to the National Gallery of Victoria), died in 1904. Even in the twentieth century relatively few notable private collections came to Australian public institutions.

In the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Walsh (1990) described Triggs as 'very much the cultivated and courteous Englishman'. His interests in antiquity fit into this pattern. He bought Greek coins because this is what an educated Englishman would acquire to accompany his reading of the classics. He was sufficiently proud of his coin collection to commission a printed catalogue from Spink and Son Ltd (1924), one of the leading coin dealers in London, and probably the main source of his material (presumably his coins had to be sent to London for this exercise). Unfortunately, the catalogue, which appeared in 1924, was unillustrated (Spink and Son Ltd 1924). There were 140 Greek coins (including coins from the Roman Provincial period), and two from Persia. He further collected some 180 Roman Republican and over 300 Roman Imperial coins. The collection was then completed by over 400 coins illustrating the history of Great Britain – it ends with a 1912 farthing minted under George V. Among the most important Greek pieces were a silver decadrachm from Syracuse signed by the engraver Euainetos and minted at the end of the fifth century BC (Spink and Son Ltd 1924; cat 92), and a gold octadrachm from Ptolemaic Egypt depicting Queen Arsinoe II and minted shortly after her death in 270 BC during the reign of Ptolemy VI (Spink and Son Ltd 1924; cat 110). It is hard to avoid the impression from the presentation of the book and its contents that the traditions of Greek and Roman coins were here believed to continue in the numismatic history of Britain. There are no coins of the various branches of the royal mint operating in the Australian colonies (for the minting of gold) or of the Australian mint after Federation.

In 1938, after the death of Triggs, his widow Mrs May Triggs presented his Greek and Roman coin collection to the Nicholson Museum at Sydney University (Trendall 1948). The donation came about through the intervention of the noted theologian Dr Samuel Angus, who held a chair of theology at St Andrews College and was also an early curator at the Nicholson (Trendall 1948). This gave the museum the largest and most important collection of ancient coins in the country. Given the lack of interest in ancient art, and the pronounced taste for replicas instead of originals, the Triggs holding of coins was probably the most important private collection of antiquities in Australia at that time. The Nicholson Museum itself could boast a fine set of electrotype copies of important Greek coins in the British

Museum (Trendall 1948). In 1962 the exhibition of the Trigg coins at the museum was robbed. The surviving Triggs coins remain unpublished.

### 3. J.R.B. Stewart (1913–1962)

My third subject, perhaps the best known of all four men, is James Rivers Barrington Stewart; he is described in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* as an ‘archaeologist, numismatist and gentleman farmer’ (Merrillees 1967, 1984, 1994; Blunt 2002;).<sup>13</sup> The son of a wealthy New South Wales property owner, he was educated at Cambridge. He eventually became a senior lecturer (under A.D. Trendall) in the new department of archaeology at the University of Sydney in 1949, and finally Edwin Cuthbert Hall Professor of Middle Eastern Archaeology in 1960.

From 1951 Stewart lived in, and farmed an estate (Abercrombie House) at Mount Pleasant, near Bathurst. He treated his home as an extension of the department of archaeology and his students (who found him a difficult man) were expected to spend time at the forty room mansion which housed his exceptional research library (ultimately bought by the University of Sydney for Fisher Library) as well as his extensive collections of antiquities. He served as director of the Melbourne Cyprus expedition, and the wealth of Bronze and Iron Age Cypriot pottery currently in public museums around Australia is the result of local subscriptions to this enterprise.

Stewart’s greatest passion was certainly numismatics; he built up an impressive collection which included the finest holding of medieval Cypriot coins in the world, but he was also interested in Rome, Byzantium and the Crusades (Blunt 2002). For many years he laboured over an elaborate treatise on the Lusignan history and coinage of medieval Cyprus (AD 1192–1474) but it would not see the light of day until posthumously published by the Bank of Cyprus in 2001 (Stewart 2002). At the time of Stewart’s death he had amassed a collection in excess of 1,500 Lusignan coins. This was in large part due to his purchase of specimens from four important hoards found on Cyprus which were acquired through export licences from the Cypriot Department of Antiquities (Metcalf 2002). Stewart died in 1962 at the age of 48. In reviewing the 2001 publication, D.M. Metcalf from the Ashmolean Museum noted that his work showed signs of ‘numismatic isolation’ (Metcalf 2002: xxiii). Nonetheless, he was the first noteworthy numismatist in the country.

Although he served as president of the Numismatic Society of New South Wales it is not clear if he made any effort to develop the numismatic collection of the Nicholson Museum at the University of Sydney. After his premature death Stewart's own numismatic collection was sold overseas (though at the time attempts were made to buy it for Sydney's Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences). The Ashmolean Museum now holds almost 80 of his Cypriot coins. It would thus seem that little numismatic evidence of Stewart's great love of Cyprus would survive in Australia. On the death of his widow in 2007 the few remains of Stewart's numismatic articles and coins were very generously bequeathed to the Australian Centre for Ancient Numismatic Studies at Macquarie University. By a strange twist of fate these included an envelope with two coins that had been personal keepsakes of his wife. The first is a tenth of a daric minted by Evagoras I of Salamis in the years between 411 and 373 BC showing Herakles on one side and a goat on the other. The second is a twelfth of a daric minted by Menelaos of Salamis between 310 and 306 BC (Markou 2011).

#### 4. W.L. Gale (1934–2007)

The final figure in this survey is Dr William Gale (Sheedy 2008a, 2008b). Bill Gale was the key figure in the emergence of ancient numismatics as a research focus supported by Australian universities. He was also the first major donor of Mediterranean antiquities to an Australian institution since Nicholson in 1860. In 1999 Dr Gale provided the funds to establish an endowment at Macquarie University in order to fund the Australian Centre for Ancient Numismatic Studies (ACANS). At the same time he lent the Centre his collection of some 3,000 coins so that it might have a strong resource base for teaching and research from the outset. This collection was given to the Centre in his will.

Bill Gale's undergraduate studies in ancient history at Macquarie University gave him the knowledge necessary to build up world class coin collections in his chosen fields. A family fortune derived from property development in Sydney gave him the means to purchase coins from auctions and sales around the world. He decided that he would confine his efforts to three areas that were linked by his passion for Italy: the Greek cities of South Italy, Roman Republic Coinage and the Emperor Hadrian. The first of these collections (some 1267 coins from South Italy) was published in 2008

as *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum Australia I* (Sheedy 2008b). It is one of the finest collections of South Italian coins in the world, and rivals all but the very largest public collections. Bill himself published one small monograph on these coins, *The Sacred Tripod. Kroton and its Coins* (Gale 1995). ACANS, which continues to develop its holdings, now has the largest public collection of ancient coins in Australia.

Bill Gale began his studies as a lawyer (having taken his degree at the University of Sydney), and Roman law was a key theme in his undergraduate and postgraduate studies in ancient history when he turned to Macquarie University after his retirement from business. Italy was central to his conception of the ancient world. The Greek coins he acquired detailed the colonisation of South Italy. It is probably not worth attempting to evoke parallels between Australia and the Greek colonies of Italy but the theme is suggestive. Hellenism here is combined with the processes of the diaspora and colonialism. Bill Gale was not an aesthete; he was a dogged student of history. He recognised that there was little to connect Australian collectors of ancient coins with the study of the subject. At the same time he believed that numismatics was largely ignored in the modern teaching of ancient history, especially in Australia. So he also became the first collector of ancient coins and antiquities to build his collections with the intention of having an impact on the teaching of ancient history in this country.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this article I indicated that I was primarily interested in Hellenism not as an academic or institutional pursuit but as a concern that could be detected in private lives from different eras of Australian society. The growing numbers of Greek migrants into Australia, especially after the Second World War, brought a new awareness of Mediterranean societies, but there is little sign that it resulted in a public interest in collecting antiquities or ancient coins, or with one exception, that it had any impact on the antiquities collections of cultural institutions. The one exception is Professor Alexander Cambitoglou and the members of the societies he organized around the Nicholson Museum for the purpose of funding purchases of antiquities (mostly ancient Attic and South Italian pottery) (Potts and Sowada 2004).

The picture that remains is mixed. There was limited interest in antiquities among the administrators of the emerging institutions of the

colonies. Von Guerard brought to Melbourne the interests and tastes of a Viennese artist, but these were not generally shared by his audience of Anglo-Saxon migrants. His coins, which I have suggested were prized as examples of the arts of antiquity, largely disappeared into the public library of Melbourne. What became of other early private art collections in the colonies and the newly founded Commonwealth of Australia?

The Melbourne numismatist John Sharples once noted that Australia lacked the noble houses and their collections which today form the basis of the great numismatic holdings in European national museums (Sharples 1986: 38). But should we conclude that there were no significant collections in Australia during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? The population size of Australia until after WWII was small (in 1900 there were only some three and three quarter million people), yet in the boom years of the 1870s and 1880s Australia was the leading producer of wool in the world; it was a very prosperous time for the landowning elite. Hellenism in the private sphere of wealthy Australians arguably came through the prism of an English conception of a good education, and English gentlemen collected coins and cameos (Redford 2008).

The collections of Triggs suggest that Greek antiquities and Greek coins might be included as part of the environment in which an educated Australian lived (and which informed his self-identity). Undoubtedly a lot of private wealth spent in this direction went on copies of famous works. James Stewart, a wealthy landowner in the New South Wales countryside and professor of archaeology was the first important numismatist in the country. His interest in coins straddled the private and the public spheres, though his medieval Cypriot coin collection was a personal possession and passion.<sup>15</sup> On his death his coins were nearly all sold overseas. It is unclear exactly when Dr Gale began planning to give his coin collections to a university and to establish a numismatic research centre, though it is evident that these plans developed while he was building his collections. His Hellenism undoubtedly came from a devotion to Rome. Each of the four collections examined reflects their owner's different resources and opportunities as well as their particular interests, but Dr Gale was able to take advantage of a much more globalized market.

In each case these Australian collectors shared in a Hellenism explored through coins. The movement of ancient artefacts to Australia was a corollary of European settlement. It was part of the material culture of an educated

European elite. The continued circulation of ancient coins is now driven by a more globalized interest in the material culture of ancient societies (for various purposes, including investment) and has less to do with an engagement with Hellenism.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The most important collections were formed by members of the great houses of Europe but the lesser nobility, merchants and members of the church also took an interest in coins.
- <sup>2</sup> Louis XIV, who inherited the collection of his uncle, Gaston d'Orléans, began the Cabinet du Roi which was the predecessor of the Cabinet des Médailles which now houses the French national numismatic collection and is a department of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.
- <sup>3</sup> See the various companies and auctions listed in *Ancient Coin Auction Catalogues 1880–1980* (Spring 2009). Sotheby's (London) earliest known coin auction occurred on the 11th February, 1755 (Spring 2009: 287), and in Paris, Rollin and Feuarent were issuing fixed price lists by 1808 (Spring 2009: 216).
- <sup>4</sup> The ancient Greek coins in Australian public collections are currently being surveyed by the author as part of the Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum Australia project.
- <sup>5</sup> This part of his collection apparently cost the artist £293.19.1. Dr Sharples has suggested to me that it might also have been an estimate of value by the author at the time of sale to the Library. See also John Sharples (2011), 'The Coin Collector', in Pullin (2011b), *Eugene von Guérard*, pp. 242–243.
- <sup>6</sup> In the catalogue there is, for example, reference to an Athenian tetradrachm from the collection of Baron von Brockesth (?) that was acquired with the help of Friedlander.
- <sup>7</sup> Note Thorvaldsen's relationship in Rome with the Danish numismatist Georg Zoëga.

<sup>8</sup> The Nicholson collection is still the most important ever brought to Australia. On Sir Charles Nicholson (1808–1903) and the University of Sydney, see the entry by David S. Macmillan (1967), in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 2, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 283–285.

<sup>9</sup> Of these collections, the manuscripts were probably the most important.

<sup>10</sup> A reproduction can be found at <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/work/OB2.1968/>

<sup>11</sup> The painting was bought by Triggs from Sotheby's London, in 1932. It was sold at auction on the death of Triggs and later purchased for the NSWAG from Sir Roy and Lady McCaughey in 1968.

<sup>12</sup> My main source for the life of Stewart has been C. E. Blunt (2002)

<sup>13</sup> For a wider view of the study of Classical archaeology in Australia (and the position of Stewart in this field) see Margaret O'Hea, "The archaeology of somewhere-else: a brief survey of Classical and Near Eastern archaeology in Australia", *Australian Archaeology* vol. 50 (2000), 75–80.