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Displaying Renaissance Art in Melbourne



Fig. 1: Master of the stories of Helen, Studio of Antonio Vivarini, *The garden of love*, c. 1465–70; oil, tempera and gold on wood, 152.5 x 239.0 cm, Felton Bequest, 1948 (1827/4), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in Melbourne houses Australia's oldest and most significant art collection. The gallery, founded in 1861, only 25 years after the creation of the Colony of Victoria, looked for inspiration to both the National Gallery and the South Kensington Museum in London and from its inception collected both fine and applied art with the express

intention of educating and elevating the taste of the general public.[1] Today the NGV's collections include over 70,000 artworks and span 5,000 years of world art history.

Reflecting the collecting interests and didactic imperatives of its British models, the NGV was from the outset concerned to represent the artistic achievements of the Renaissance in

Europe. But the Trustees at the time did not set their sights upon original artworks; the young colony lacked the imposing private collections which were instrumental in the development of the great European and North American metropolitan collections, and the gallery lacked the funds to buy on the world market. Rather, casts, electrotypes and reproductions were acquired in order to place before the colonial public examples of what were deemed the choicest works of the most celebrated artists of the Renaissance.^[2] While a small selection of pre-seventeenth century European glass, ceramics, metalwork, textiles and prints were purchased for the collection through the 1870s and 1890s, it was only in the early twentieth century, with the establishment of the Felton Bequest, that significant examples of Renaissance art were able to be acquired. Alfred Felton, a Melbourne industrialist, died in 1904 leaving a substantial financial bequest which, from 1906 onwards, finally allowed the NGV to begin acquiring artworks of the highest quality. At the time of its establishment, the Felton Bequest made the NGV one of the wealthiest art museums in the world and provided it with unparalleled buying power. Between 1906 and the 1950s when the art market began its inexorable upward spiral, the Felton Bequest facilitated a series of significant acquisitions that today form the core of the gallery's Renaissance holdings.^[3] Important additions to the collection included purchases from the 1936 Oppenheimer sale and the 1939 Pringsheim sale, both in London. Other significant acquisitions included an early-fifteenth century carved altarpiece from Antwerp, and a late fifteenth-century Flemish winged altarpiece with the Miracles of Christ.^[4] These early Felton purchases were supplemented by a number of donations from private collections, the most significant of which was perhaps the bequest of Mr Howard Spensley of Westoning Manor, Bedfordshire, England, formerly of Melbourne, whose collection, which came to the gallery in 1939, included a large group of bronzes, plaquettes, mortars and a selection of Italian maiolica.^[5] The

latter half of the twentieth century saw further acquisitions – especially paintings (including works by Correggio, Francia, Annibale Carracci and Perino del Vaga), a few key maiolica works, and a large and important collection of works on paper by Albrecht Dürer – expand the holdings of European Renaissance art.^[6] Recent conservation campaigns have also prompted reassessment of a number of works in the collection, including a late fifteenth-century Northern Italian profile portrait of a lady, and the attribution of a portrait acquired by the Felton Bequest in 1966 to Dosso and Battista Dossi and the identification of the sitter as Lucrezia Borgia.

As they stand today, the NGV's Renaissance collections are the most important holdings of European Renaissance art in the Southern hemisphere and are the only significant collection of this material in Australia. Their pedagogical significance is thus considerable. But whilst the Gallery's collections, including paintings, drawings, prints, manuscripts, ceramics, bronzes, glass, furniture and textiles, have notable areas of strength and include individual works of great quality, they are far from comprehensive, and much material can only be described as representative of a given class of object. The collections do not allow a systematic examination of developments in European visual culture, or even Italian visual culture, across the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries and traditional approaches to display, with collection material organised along lines of chronology, place of origin and medium, tended to highlight the lacunae in the holdings more than anything else.

In 2014 an opportunity arose to reconsider the display of the museum's European Renaissance collections. In 2003 the St Kilda Road campus of the NGV dedicated to the display of the gallery's International holdings reopened after a major five year redevelopment of the building. The displays of the Renaissance collections installed at this time were largely organised on the basis of medium and chronology. A decade of piecemeal alterations to these displays brought about through works going out on loan,

rotation of works in and out of storage, and new acquisitions, had disrupted much of the order of the initial hang. A change in the museum's directorship resulted in a decision to revisit these gallery spaces, providing the occasion for the present writer, in collaboration with colleague Sophie Matthiesson, Curator of International Painting and Sculpture, to explore alternate modes for the display and interpretation of the Renaissance material.

In a recent article, the present writer has considered some of the epistemological issues that adhere to the place of the so-called 'decorative arts' in art historical discourse, and by extension, museum art collections and their display.[7] A project aimed at reconfiguring the displays of some of the key works in the NGV's European Renaissance collections offered an opportunity to explore some of these issues surrounding the imposition of enlightenment art historical hierarchies on pre-enlightenment European visual culture. Recent scholarship emphasising social understandings of the rituals marking the life cycle of individuals and families in Renaissance Italy in particular has opened up new directions in studying European visual and material culture in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. Publications like, for example, Jacqueline Musacchio's *Art, Marriage and Family in Renaissance Florence* and Dora Thornton's *The Scholar in his Study*, along with exhibitions like *At Home in Renaissance Italy* at the V&A in 2006, and *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy* at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2008 have demonstrated the possibilities of an approach that considers the material culture of the Italian Renaissance from both a contextual, as well as a more traditional, connoisseurial perspective.[8] In particular, the focus on the household evidenced in these publications and exhibitions marks a shift away from more traditional art historical concerns like delineating artist's oeuvre or the development of artistic styles and influences. In turning to the study of material culture and materiality, art historians have expanded their purview to include a much broader

type of object than was once the case.[9] Objects collected by museums as examples of the 'applied arts' are now being given the scholarly attention once preserved for the 'fine arts' of painting and sculpture, a hierarchical distinction characteristic of traditional art historical approaches but one that is far less clearly defined in the Renaissance.[10] A new emphasis upon the materiality of the domestic realm and the pivotal life events that took place there, such as betrothal, marriage and birth, frame the interpretation of objects acquired by Italian families in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Civic life in many Italian communes depended on the complex interweaving of social and political networks and many such alliances were forged through marriage. As Musacchio and others argue, material objects from *cassoni* to birth trays visually highlighted the crucial role of the family and its material existence in ensuring the stability and prosperity of the city.[11]

Inspired by the insights arising out of this turn to the domestic realm in recent art historical approaches to the Renaissance, it was decided that a thematic, rather than chronological or geographically determined approach to the Renaissance holdings would make optimum use of the collection. A new display of the NGV's fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian collections has been organised around themes relating to life in the elite Italian domestic interior: marriage rituals, domestic devotion, the humanist scholar, the roles of women. This approach has a number of advantages for a collection like the NGV's. By incorporating an artwork into a display which places emphasis upon its function in its original context, new significance may be attributed to works which, when construed as part of, for example, a gallery dedicated to a more traditional and somewhat abstracted history of painting in post-medieval Italy, may appear somewhat eccentric. A case in point is the late fifteenth-century panel painting *The garden of love* by the Master of the Stories of Helen from the studio of Antonio Vivarini (fig. 1).



Fig. 2 & 3: Italy, Rome, *Judith and Holofernes*, pair of chests (*Cassoni*), 1570s, Walnut (*Juglans sp.*), (1) 74.3 x 180.2 x 60.7 cm (2) 75.7 x 180.2 x 62.2 cm, Felton Bequest, 1955 (1547.1-2-D4), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

Acquired as a work of the School of Pisanello in 1948 from the dealer Tomás Harris in London on the recommendation of Sir Kenneth Clark, the then Adviser to the Felton Bequest, this picture is an example of a *spalliera*, a painted wooden panel that formed part of an interior architectural scheme.^[12] As an example of fifteenth-century painting evidencing the continuing influence of the International style in the Veneto *The garden of love* is of passing interest. As a rare survival of a once widespread form of interior architectural embellishment in fifteenth-century Italy, this *spalliera* panel, with its fascinating, gnomic iconography is of enormous importance.^[13] The work's significance is enhanced by the survival of a pendant panel in a private Italian collection, and its very close relationship with three further panels at the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore which appear to have been part of the same interior scheme at some point in their history.^[14]

When this panel – the *spalliera* is hung higher than normal for paintings in the gallery, emphasising its original architectural context – is juxtaposed with a pair of late sixteenth-century Roman *cassoni* carved with scenes from the tale of Judith and Holofernes, ideas about the representational role of the objects commissioned for the interior of the Renaissance *casa* and their significance for celebrating and memorialising important life events like marriage are opened

up for exploration through label text (fig. 2 & 3).^[15] Of course, such a *spalliera* if it had ever adorned the walls of a *camera* would probably never have been viewed in conjunction with carved *cassoni* of this later date and type; in the fifteenth-century the coordination of painted *forzieri* and painted *spallieri* was normal for the marriage chamber.^[16] But detailed recreation of a domestic interior space is not the point of the displays and the nature of the NGV collection necessitates entertaining a degree of chronological and geographical elasticity when presenting works. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition facilitates discussion of a number of ideas: the rituals surrounding marriage; the role of artworks in the performance of these rituals; the development of the wedding chest as a furniture form across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; as well as the narrative and iconographic ambition of many artworks intended for the *casa*, a feature that must frequently have had overt didactic intent and which was clearly appreciated by humanists for whom the challenge of interpreting these pictorial texts functioned as evidence of their culture and learning.



Fig. 4: Workshop of the Embriachi, Florence/Venice, Casket, c. 1450, wood, iron, bone, coloured woods, Bequest of Howard Spensley, 1939 (4120-D3), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

In proximity to *The garden of love* and the Judith and Holofernes *cassoni*, a group of works including an Embriachi workshop casket decorated with images of couples, probably a marriage casket (*cassette da sposa*) (fig. 4), a murano glass serving dish (*coppa*) with impaled coats of arms (fig. 5), and an *istoriato* plate from Nicola d'Urbino's d'Este service, with the arms of Francesco Gonzaga impaling those of Isabella d'Este (fig. 6) illustrate the themes of the exchange of love gifts, the marriage alliance of great houses, and the generosity and ostentation which accompanied and publicly marked the celebration of betrothals.

Other *istoriato* wares from the gallery's representative, but far from exhaustive maiolica holdings, including two dishes from the *Sapiens* service, are shown in a grouped display intended to evoke the spectacle of the credenza associated with celebratory betrothal banquets.^[17] Ostensibly utilitarian objects, these wares were more than likely intended primarily for display. This fact is emphasised by the inclusion in the group of a pair of closely related double-spouted ewers of around 1560-70 from the Fontana workshop of elaborate and fantastical grotesque form (fig. 7).^[18] Reminiscent of the fantastic objects in carved hardstone and pre-

cious metal made by Jacques Bylivert and Bernardo Buontalenti in the Granducal workshops of Florence during the second half of the sixteenth century, these ewers were almost certainly intended purely for display. In this regard, a display case of *istoriato* ceramics in a museum context rehearses something of the material's original purpose: notionally functional objects which showcase the most sophisticated ceramic technology and aesthetic ambition of their day, in the process establishing in the eyes of the audience the humanist credentials and discrimination of their owners.

Other maiolica wares have been displayed in creative dialogue with one of the jewels of the Italian Renaissance collection, a late fifteenth-century Northern Italian profile portrait of a woman (fig. 8). This refined portrait depicts a young woman in the rich costume and jewellery associated with marriage. The dating and authorship of the portrait remain problematic. The proportions of the painting, recently re-established through conservation, closely match those of similar portraits emanating from the courts of Ferrara and Mantua. While the brooch worn by the woman probably dates to the 1470s, her headdress is of a type that was fashionable around 1430-50. Since the profile format was sometimes used for representing the deceased, it is possible that the portrait is posthumous, thus explaining the sitter's old-fashioned hairstyle.^[19]

The portrait is here displayed with two maiolica works – an early sixteenth-century dish of the *bella donna* type from Deruta (fig. 9), and a mid-sixteenth-century spouted jar from the Pompei workshop in Castelli decorated with adorsed portraits of a young woman in profile and an older man in three-quarter view (fig. 10).^[20] Such a juxtaposition aims to disrupt and problematise any presuppositions that a viewer might bring about the relative significance of these different Renaissance artforms – painting and ceramics. Both the Northern Italian portrait and the Deruta dish employ the profile portrait format to present images of idealised female beauty.



Fig. 5: Italy, Venice, Footed dish (*Coppa*), early 16th century, glass, enamel, gilt, 5.6 x 24.1 cm diameter, Felton Bequest, 1972 (D16-1972), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.



Fig. 6: Nicola da Urbino, *Jupiter and Semele*, plate, c. 1524; earthenware (maiolica), 2.9 x 27.1 cm diameter, Felton Bequest, 1940 (4710-D3), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

But once again, the potential functional quality of the ceramic dish probably remained unrealised. It was an object, like the painting, intended primarily to be admired for the beauty of its imagery, as well as for its technical accomplishment. Unlike the painting, however, the image on the dish is a pseudo-portrait: details of hair, jewelry and costume imbue the image with a certain individuality, but the figure is not of any particular young woman; instead it is an eroticised fantasy beauty intended for the enjoyment and titillation of a male viewer. But this is a quality the dish shares with the painted portrait whose sitter is also presented as the object of a male gaze. The sitter's rich costume and sumptuous jewelry are statements of a husband's rank and a record of a joining of lineages in marriage. Although the sitter may have been a real person, the painting is not a record of an individual personality but a document of family honour.

Different again is the use of the profile portrait format on the Castelli pharmacy jug. The jug, with a spout in the form of a serpent or dragon as the scaled pattern on the underside reveals, was intended to hold red currant syrup for use in a pharmacy. The spout is flanked by a pair of portraits; a young woman in profile, and,

in three-quarter view, an old man, as indicated by his beard. Profile portraits of young women were sometimes matched by portraits of men, commemorating a marriage.^[21] A tradition also existed of images satirising mismatched couples; especially beautiful young women with old, often ugly, men. The portraits on this jar may well be an example of this phenomenon. Here, the artist transforms the whole vessel into a very elaborate visual joke. The images of the ill-suited couple are separated by the serpent of the jug's spout; the spout thus suggests the temptation – and with its phallic form, the manner of temptation – which will eventually mar the relationship between the foolish old man and his young bride. The witty decoration of the jug does not appear to have any direct relationship to the vessel's pharmacy function. It nevertheless creates of the jug an object which is intended, not only to be functional, but to be scrutinised and read by a sophisticated audience.

The contemporary dichotomy between the sacred and the secular was largely alien to pre-Enlightenment Europe. Distinctions too between domestic and public ritual space were far less rigid. Devotional objects often suffer multiple distortions of meaning when displayed in museum contexts. They are frequently wholly



Fig. 7: Installation detail, 15th and 16th century Italian gallery, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

aestheticized, construed as examples of compositional innovation or technical accomplishment in a history of, for example, painting or sculpture, their original devotional function ignored. The vital materiality of these artefacts, essential to their intended significance – their animation through lighting, through ritualised concealment and revelation, their physical interaction with the devout through kissing and touching, their adornment with jewels and clothing – all of this is, by necessity, absent from their display in an art museum; the practical requirements of conservation, central to the very conception of a modern museum, preclude such treatment of these objects.

But display strategies can attempt to address other distortions in the presentation of devotional objects. In particular, an emphasis upon the importance of sacred images and devotion in the *casa* combats a common misconception that domestic space was somehow a secular



Fig. 8: Northern Italy, Profile portrait of a lady, c. 1465-1475, tempera and oil on poplar panel, 38.0 x 25.0 cm (image) 40.0 x 26.5 cm (panel), Felton Bequest, 1946 (1541-4), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

realm, to be contrasted with public liturgical spaces. The inventories of most fifteenth-century Florentine bedchambers include an image of the Virgin Mary. Devotional images were extremely important in the domestic interior, and the buying or commissioning of such images often took place at the time of a marriage.^[22] They guaranteed the presence of the Virgin, the Christ child and other saints in the very heart of the house, providing protection for the inhabitants, particularly women in childbirth and young children, as well as providing exemplary role models for these same women and children. As part of the new collection displays, a group of images of the Virgin and Child are presented as yet further examples of the furnishings characteristic of the Renaissance *casa* – their essential domesticity is emphasised (fig. 11). These works include two of the most important paintings in the Italian Renaissance collections, a Madonna and Child with the infant St John the Baptist, c. 1514-15,



Fig. 9: Italy, Deruta, Dish, 1520-1530, earthenware (maiolica), 9.2 x 41.6 cm diameter, Felton Bequest, 1970 (D63-1970), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

by Correggio, and a Madonna and Child with the young Saint John in a garden of roses, c. 1515, by Francesco Francia and studio. These paintings are shown together with a Madonna and Child relief, c. 1480, by the Master of the Marble Madonnas, and a tin-glazed earthenware image of the Madonna and Child, c. 1500-15 from the workshop of Benedetto and Santi Buglioni.

The varied media and scales of these devotional images speak of differing degrees of wealth and social rank. And these can be supplemented from time to time by more humble works on paper; printed devotional images. But all are united by their common devotional function; their role in providing a focus for piety in the household, as well as ensuring the presence of holy powers in the home and the talismanic and apotropaic benefits this was believed to bring.^[23]

Although the new gallery displays are built around the fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian collections, the works exhibited are not exclusively Italian in origin. Reflecting trends in contemporary scholarship that emphasise the networks of exchange between various European centres that are vital to this period,



Fig. 10: Pompei Workshop, Castelli, Red currant syrup pot, 1540-1560, earthenware (maiolica), 25.8 x 22.0 x 17.0 cm, Felton Bequest, 1906 (600-D2), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

objects have been incorporated into the displays, to the extent that the museum's collections allow, that highlight various influences at play in contemporary Italian visual and material culture. Examples of Iznik pottery from the Ottoman world and Hispano-Moresque lustre-glaze ware from southern Spain illustrate important influences on the Italian ceramic industries whose products were beginning to occupy an important place in the furnishing of the elite *casa*. A mid-sixteenth-century Venetian maiolica dish is decorated with a blue on blue pattern that ultimately derives from Ming Chinese porcelain, a highly-prized commodity that was reaching the republic in small quantities in the sixteenth-century via overland trade routes through Asia and the Middle East (fig. 12). A small group of South Italian classical ceramics, including a Campanian red-figure ware bell krater attributed to the



Fig. 11: Installation detail, 15th and 16th century Italian gallery, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

Siamese painter, evokes the Humanist fascination with the classical world. Although rarer than sculpture, architecture and bronzes, ancient ceramics were much admired by Humanist scholars and collectors. Painted vases in particular were subjects of great interest. In the 1568 edition of his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, the artist and writer Giorgio Vasari asserted that with the perfection of istoriato maiolica, contemporary Italian potters had outdone the craftsmen of the ancient world.[24]

The emphasis in the new displays upon the intersection between ritual associated with critical events in the life of the family and the consumption of artworks intended for the domestic realm is not merely a reflection of current trends in Italian Renaissance art history translated into the

museum context. It is also a strategy which addresses issues concerned with contemporary audience engagement. The audience who visits a museum like the NGV today is very different to the institution's audience fifty years ago. Then, a person with a university education was a product of an educational system that still in many ways presented itself as a continuation of the Humanist tradition whose ideals so powerfully shaped the culture of fourteenth and fifteenth century Italy. Many would have imbibed the (now controversial) Burckhardtian historiographical trope of the Italian Renaissance as the beginning of the civilizing of Europe and would have brought with them a familiarity with, even if not a personal sympathy for, the idea that the artistic achievements of Renaissance Italy formed part of the canon of Western civilization. Members of an educated audience brought with them too at least some familiarity with a broad outline of European history. They were almost certainly of



Fig. 12: Italy, Venice, Plate; c. 1550, earthenware (maiolica), 2.3 x 24.6 cm diameter, Felton Bequest, 1939 (4472-D3), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

European background, and in the Australian context, quite probably even more specifically of British heritage.

Today, all of this is different. Contemporary Australia is a secular society with a diverse multicultural makeup. Many visitors are from non-Western, non-Christian, or radically secular cultural backgrounds and it can no longer be assumed that they will have even basic familiarity with the history of post-Medieval Europe. In short, the cultural narratives which prompted and informed the assembling of the NGV's collections of Renaissance artefacts are no longer commonly understood. This has some immediate practical implications. The content of Christian images must be clearly explained; there can be no assumption about familiarity with the narratives and rituals of Christianity. So too must episodes from Classical literature be clearly identified and explicated, a point especially relevant where one is dealing with Humanist artefacts.

But more significantly, if it can no longer be taken as given that the museum visitor will identify in artworks of the Renaissance the cultu-

ral narratives that the museum's founders wished to promulgate – that this is where 'we' come from – it is necessary to suggest other narratives to animate these works and provide visitors a means of engaging with them. Here, the emphasis on consumption seems powerful and productive. We more and more live in an age where consumption is a primary vehicle of self-expression. Brands and labels seem to have become an inextricable part of the discourse of negotiating social identity. Although the parameters surrounding consumption amongst fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian elites are obviously quite different to contemporary commercial consumption, there are parallels to be drawn in the way artworks were acquired by Renaissance elites to facilitate, mark and memorialise the public and semi-public rituals that defined their role and status in the community. This is something that has the potential to resonate strongly with a contemporary audience. This is not to suggest that the sumptuous gown worn by the woman in the Northern Italian profile portrait communicates the same meaning as the Louis Vuitton handbag carried by a visitor who has paused to view the painting. The betrothal gown worn by the sixteenth-century sitter is an outward mark of a man's wealth; we cannot necessarily make the same assumption about the modern visitor's handbag. But both gown and bag are consumer items that are intended to convey certain impressions about the access to material wealth of the bearer. They aspire to impart a certain impression of status. To the extent that a modern visitor can identify with the idea of consumption communicated by these artworks, a channel is opened up for the exploration of differences as well as similarities between then and now.

The organisation of artworks in these new relationships reflecting their roles in social rituals like betrothal and marriage, whilst informed by contemporary art-historical thinking, has the effect of simplifying didactic materials presented in the gallery space. Labels may be liberated from the types of scholarly apparatus that can make displays seem dead and irrelevant to

those audience members who do not bring with them a basic grounding in art history. Label texts directed towards the relationship between social function and consumption obviate the need for unwieldy and irrelevant-seeming minutiae about, for example, questions of authorship and other traditional concerns of connoisseurship. Many of the relationships suggested between artworks become immediately obvious both visually and materially; the works are 'activated' by the juxtapositions made in the gallery space.

And there are, in the museum context, other practical corollaries of these display strategies. The training of volunteer guides or docents, a responsibility of curators, becomes much more effective and rewarding for everyone concerned. In a limited time it is possible to impart fundamental social concepts reflected in the artworks – notions of different world views and belief systems, social values and customs, and the function of objects in mediating relationships with other people and with the divine – that resonate with both guides and their audiences. Moving forward, these are concerns that can be translated into new publications about the museum's collections. The connoisseurial issues discussed in the one major publication on the NGV's European painting collection by Dr Ursula Hoff, a work now some twenty years old, can often appear very opaque, and even irrelevant, to the museum's contemporary visitor.[25] Publications that reflect the historical synthesis across media that the rehang of the fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian collections attempts open up new ways of engaging the public with the collections; the example set, in particular, by the V&A's publications on its British, and Medieval and Renaissance gallery redevelopments are excellent cases in point.[26]

The NGV's Italian Renaissance holdings are not comprehensive, either geographically or chronologically. Nor do they represent many of the canonical heroes of Italian Renaissance art. But the history of visual and material culture in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Europe was more than the history of a handful of privileged men,

however gifted. By presenting the NGV's Italian collections in a way that foregrounds the visual and material role played by artworks in the life events of families in the Renaissance *casa*, the displays invite audiences to bring their own experiences of material culture and family life into the gallery space and so begin to develop understandings of both past and present life ways.

Notes

1. The institution's name reflects its colonial history. Prior to federation in 1901, Victoria was one of a number of independent crown colonies on the Australian continent. The gallery founded in Melbourne in 1861 was thus a national institution of an independent colony of Victoria.
2. Sadly, the majority of these reproductions were disposed of in the early twentieth century, victims of changing tastes in museum displays.
3. John Poynter, *Mr Felton's Bequest*, Melbourne 2003.
4. On the triptych (1247-D3) see Catheline Périer-D'leteren, *Contributions to the Study of the Triptych with the Miracles of Christ, The Marriage of Cana*, in: *Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* 31, 1990: <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/contributions-to-the-study-of-the-triptych-with-the-miracles-of-christ-the-marriage-of-cana/> 5/5/2015; Catheline Périer-D'leteren, *Contributions to the Study of the Melbourne Triptych II: The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, The Raising of Lazarus, The Rest on the Flight to Egypt and St Peter*, in: *Art Bulletin of the National Gallery of Victoria* 34, 1993: <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/contributions-to-the-study-of-the-melbourne-triptych-ii-the-miracle-of-the-loaves-and-fishes-the-raising-of-lazarus-the-rest-on-the-flight-to-egypt-and-st-peter/> 5/5/2015.
5. Terence Lane, *The Development of the Collections of Decorative Arts in the National Gallery of Victoria*, in: *Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* 21, 1980: <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/the-development-of-the-collections-of-decorative-arts-in-the-national-gallery-of-victoria/> 4/5/2015.
6. *Albrecht Dürer in the Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria*, ed. by Irena Zdanowicz, Melbourne 1994. The acquisition of the Sir Thomas Barlow collection in 1956 transformed the NGV into one of the world's most important repositories of Dürer's prints.

7. Matthew Martin, *Relics of Another Age. Art History, the 'Decorative Arts' and the Museum*, in: *Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* 49, 2009: <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/relics-of-another-age-art-history-the-decorative-arts-and-the-museum/> 4/5/2015.
 8. Jacqueline Musacchio, *Art, Marriage and Family in Renaissance Florence*, New Haven / London 2008; Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in his Study*, New Haven / London 1997; *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, London 2006; *Art and Love in the Italian Renaissance*, ed. by Andrea Bayer, New Haven / London 2008.
 9. *Everyday Objects. Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meanings*, ed. by Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, Surrey-Burlington 2010, p.1-23.
 10. See Luke Syson and Dora Thornton, *Objects of Virtue. Art in Renaissance Italy*, London 2004, p. 229-261.
 11. Jacqueline Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, New Haven / London 1999.
 12. Ursula Hoff, *European Paintings before 1800 in the National Gallery of Victoria*, 4th edn, Melbourne 1995, p. 306-308.
 13. For a technical examination of this panel see John Payne, *Exploring a Fifteenth-Century Garden. A Restoration Uncovers the Past*, in: *Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* 35, 1994, p. 7-20: <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/exploring-a-fifteenth-century-garden-a-restoration-uncover-the-past/> 4/5/2015.
 14. Three panels by the Master of the Stories of Helen, The Walters Art Museum, 37.1178, 37.1179, 37.1180. See Payne 1994, *Exploring a Fifteenth-Century Garden*, p. 10-11.
 15. On the pair of cassoni see Anna Drummond, *Marriage and Murder. Two Wedding Chests with Representations of Judith*, in: *Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* 53, 2014, p. 9-19.
 16. Caroline Campbell, *Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence. The Courtauld Wedding Chests*, London 2009, p. 12-29.
 17. A catalogue of the NGV's Italian maiolica collection by Timothy Wilson, Barrie and Deedee Wigmore Research Keeper, Department of Western Art in the Ashmolean Museum, is forthcoming.
 18. Accession numbers D98A-1971 and D98B-1971.
 19. This painting will be the subject of a study in preparation by Carl Villis, Conservator of European Paintings at the NGV. See also Patricia Simons, *A Profile Portrait of a Renaissance Woman in the National Gallery of Victoria*, in: *Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* 28: <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/a-profile-portrait-of-a-renaissance-woman-in-the-national-gallery-of-victoria/> 4/5/2015.
 20. D63-1970 and 600-D2.
 21. *Virtue and Beauty. Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, ed. by David Alan Brown, Princeton 2003.
 22. On domestic devotional imagery in Florence see Ronald G. Kecks, *Madonna und Kind. Das häusliche Andachtsbild im Florenz des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1988.
 23. Musacchio 2008, *Art, Marriage and Family*, p. 190-228.
 24. Syson and Thornton 2004, *Objects of Virtue*, p. 214-215.
 25. Ursula Hoff, *European Paintings before 1800 in the National Gallery of Victoria*, Melbourne 1995 [= Fourth edition].
 26. Michael Snodin and John Styles, *Design and the Decorative Arts. Britain 1500-1900*, London 2001; Glyn Davies and Nora Kennedy, *Medieval and Renaissance Art. People and Possessions*, London 2009.
- ## Figures
- Fig. 1: Master of the stories of Helen, Studio of Antonio Vivarini, *The garden of love*, c. 1465-70; oil, tempera and gold on wood, 152.5 x 239.0 cm, Felton Bequest, 1948 (1827/4), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.
- Fig. 2 & 3: Italy, Rome, *Judith and Holofernes*, pair of chests (*Cassoni*), 1570s, Walnut (*Juglans* sp.), (1) 74.3 x 180.2 x 60.7 cm (2) 75.7 x 180.2 x 62.2 cm, Felton Bequest, 1955 (1547.1-2-D4), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.
- Fig. 4: Workshop of the Embriachi, Florence/Venice, *Casket*, c. 1450, wood, iron, bone, coloured woods, Bequest of Howard Spensley, 1939 (4120-D3), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.
- Fig. 5: Italy, Venice, *Footed dish (Coppa)*, early 16th century, glass, enamel, gilt, 5.6 x 24.1 cm diameter, Felton Bequest, 1972 (D16-1972), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.
- Fig. 6: Nicola da Urbino, *Jupiter and Semele*, plate, c. 1524; earthenware (maiolica), 2.9 x 27.1 cm diameter, Felton Bequest, 1940 (4710-D3), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.
- Fig. 7: Installation detail, 15th and 16th century Italian gallery, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

Fig. 8: Northern Italy, Profile portrait of a lady, c. 1465-1475, tempera and oil on poplar panel, 38.0 x 25.0 cm (image) 40.0 x 26.5 cm (panel), Felton Bequest, 1946 (1541-4), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

Fig. 9: Italy, Deruta, Dish, 1520-1530, earthenware (maiolica), 9.2 x 41.6 cm diameter, Felton Bequest, 1970 (D63-1970), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

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Fig. 11: Installation detail, 15th and 16th century Italian gallery, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

Fig. 12: Italy, Venice, Plate; c. 1550, earthenware (maiolica), 2.3 x 24.6 cm diameter, Felton Bequest, 1939 (4472-D3), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.

Abstract

In 2014 the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia embarked upon a redisplay of its Italian fifteenth and sixteenth century holdings. Inspired by recent art historical scholarship exploring the materiality of family life in the Renaissance *casa* the new displays depart from the traditional museum ordering principles of geography and chronology in favour of groupings of artworks structured around themes like marriage, domestic devotion and the Humanist scholar. Such thematic displays not only make best use of the museum's collections which, whilst including many works of great distinction, are by no means comprehensive in scope, but also open up new avenues of audience engagement. By replacing the interpretive apparatus of traditional connoisseurship with an interest in the role of objects in performing and memorialising the rituals surrounding key life events of fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian families, as well as exploring the role of consumption in self-representation, connections are forged with the

lives and interests of the contemporary visiting public.

Author

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Title

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