

[Click here to return to newsletter contents.](#)

A Trip to the Archives: IPCAA and the Kelsey Connection



Anyone visiting the Kelsey Museum during the working day (and much of the night, too) will run into students: the undergraduates who staff the guard's desk, work-study students, students attending discussion sections as part of introductory classes on Greek and Roman archaeology, and (especially) any of the two dozen or so graduate students enrolled in IPCAA (the Interdepartmental Program in Classical Art and Archaeology). Our IPCAA students teach and are taught in the Museum; they use its library and computer facilities, work on material in its collections, and make heavy use of the study spaces allocated to them on the second floor and in the refurbished Hosmer Laboratory in the basement: it has become virtually their home away from home. But it has not always been so . . .

How much things have changed became very apparent to me as a result of a recent invitation to speak at a symposium entitled "Centrifugation: Groups and Centers in the Humanities and Their Implications for Traditional Disciplines," supported by the Mellon Foundation and held in Fall 2002 at Bryn Mawr College. My brief was to present an account of how IPCAA came about, to give a sense of its history, scope, goals, successes, and pitfalls, and to evaluate its current interdepartmental and interdisciplinary structure. Yet IPCAA was already over a quarter-century old by the time I became its director in 1994, so I needed to learn more about its inception and early years for the purposes of that symposium. Thus I became involved in a fascinating trawl through some dusty archives pulled out of cold storage, as well as in conversations with colleagues who were around at the time of IPCAA's birth.

New Program Proposed

The documents reveal that the proposal to establish a new interdepartmental Program in Classical Archaeology, in October 1968, arose from several considerations. One was student demand, since the doctoral programs in both Classical Studies and History of Art were too onerous and not well suited for those whose primary interests lay in classical art and archaeology. Another was the belief that the national educational structure at that time needed more well-trained Ph.D.s in this field. But above all, there was a feeling that excellent existing resources and opportunities were being underutilize--notably, an impressive range of teaching at Michigan in Greek and Roman art and archaeology, at both undergraduate and graduate levels; the University's commitment to active Museum-sponsored fieldwork, going all the way back to Francis Kelsey himself in the 1920s; and the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, admittedly somewhat moribund at the time but well stocked with more than 100,000 Graeco-Roman, Egyptian, and Near Eastern objects.

Such reasoning made good sense, and on 4 March 1969 the Graduate School formally approved this new interdepartmental program, establishing a director and a five-person executive committee (two each from Classical Studies and History of Art, and one from the Kelsey Museum), allowing at most two students to be admitted each year, providing one fellowship (of \$2,000 per annum!), and setting up a joint degree.

Difficult Beginnings

But things did not go at all well in the first three or four years. Not only were there few faculty and even fewer students, but some fundamental disagreements emerged about the Program's very nature and its relationship to the Kelsey. George Forsyth, for example, the History of Art professor who had recently become the Museum's director (and a founding member of the new Program's committee), expressed some of his concerns in a memo to the graduate dean and his executive committee on 22 April 1969. "A museum cannot be treated like an ordinary classroom building," he wrote, and "I do not believe in this hybrid between the two disciplines [i.e., Classical Studies and Art History] . . . or its career value." But Forsyth also quite rightly lamented the narrow training the Program seemed to be providing, with inadequate exposure to modern techniques of fieldwork and no "studies in contiguous sub-disciplines, above all anthropology."



A social event at the Kelsey Museum, ca. 1972. The director of the Museum, George H. Forsyth, Jr., faces the camera; Curator Louise Shier (seated) pours tea for Donald White, director of the new Program in Classical Archaeology.

This view resonated with the dean, who in June 1970 contacted the Program's chair, Donald White, to suggest that "persons in Griffin's department should be involved in running the Program," mentioning as possibilities some illustrious names (Kent Flannery, Henry Wright, and Bob Whallon--all still active faculty members at the University). "Griffin's department" refers, of course, to the anthropological archaeologists based in the Museum of Anthropology, of which Professor James B. Griffin was then the distinguished director. As White wrote to an Executive Committee colleague: "the Dean seems to be hinting pretty strongly here that we include an anthropology person on our committee. . . . I am really curious to know where the pressure is coming from to deal with the Griffin boys!"



Tea and conversation in the Kelsey rear gallery, ca. 1972. Ted Buttrey, standing at the table, chats with Donald White; John D'Arms stands second from right.

In short, the frequent academic blight of departmental turf wars and disciplinary barriers. All this, combined with serious student complaints and the Program's inability to persuade good applicants to accept funded offers, led the graduate dean, in September 1971, to propose the discontinuation of the Program in favor of a looser interdepartmental framework, custom-built for the individual student. The whole Program, in other words, nearly collapsed. To make matters worse, the Kelsey Museum, perceived at the time as little more than a mummy show for schoolchildren, was itself under serious consideration of permanent closure by the University authorities, who felt it had come to have little relevance for Michigan's teaching and research missions.



IPCAA students in one of the spaces allocated to them in the Kelsey Museum, 2003. Left to right: Lori Khatchadourian, Catherine Lyon, and Jane Rempel.

Better Times

So what saved the day for IPCAA? Ironically, it was, in fact, the Kelsey Museum, under the guidance of its new director, John Pedley. Faced with that very real threat of its closure, Pedley argued aggressively for the intellectual and pedagogical importance

of the Kelsey. He underscored not only the international significance of the Museum's holdings and the value of its excavation projects but for the first time also emphasized IPCAA as "a strong and varied graduate program in Classical and Near Eastern Archaeology which would make full use of the regional materials in the Museum both for purposes of instruction and for doctoral theses." Significantly, too, the Museum's collections are richest in Roman and late antique materials. So Pedley was able to use this fact to strengthen his argument that there existed a need in North America for a center of excellence in the instruction of specifically Roman art and archaeology. IPCAA, in short, believed it had identified a market niche!

And the administration heeded his case. In 1974 it approved two new appointments--to be held jointly between academic departments and the Kelsey--for Elaine Gazda (in Roman art) and John Humphrey (in Roman architecture and archaeology). To some extent, this move built on existing strength, given the presence at

Michigan of a leading expert in Roman numismatics (Ted Buttrey) and a major player in Roman epigraphy and social history (John D'Arms). The new Near Eastern element in the Program's identity was reinforced, shortly thereafter, by a joint appointment in History of Art and the Kelsey for Margaret Cool Root, while Sharon Herbert's arrival at about this time added strength to art and archaeology teaching on the Greek side.

Faculty thus reached a critical mass. IPCAA was thoroughly reformulated and relaunched but now as a fully autonomous, Ph.D.-granting, interdepartmental program. Permits and funds were sought to embark on major new excavations in Roman Carthage, which began in 1975. The Kelsey Museum was reprieved and has gone from strength to strength, especially since its thoroughgoing rebuild in the early 1990s. And, most importantly, the student response to all these developments was immediate: in 1972-73, nine offers yielded only one acceptance, while just three years later, eight offers produced an incoming class of six. IPCAA was now truly up and running, and over the course of the next three decades it has proceeded to establish a well-deserved reputation as a premier program in the field.

Today, the Kelsey provides an academic home and invaluable resources for our IPCAA graduates, just as the vitality of daily life in the Kelsey is greatly enhanced by our students' engagement with its collections, exhibitions, and programs. Yet the yellowing papers and fading memories from 30 years ago offer sobering testimony to the fact that, without each other, both might very well have been snuffed out altogether.

John Cherry

John Cherry has been director of IPCAA since 1994 and was appointed as a curator at the Kelsey Museum last year. He is grateful to Don Cameron, the late John D'Arms, Bruce Frier, and John Pedley for sharing information and reminiscences about IPCAA's earliest days.

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