

A Speaking Past

Research Comes Alive
at the Carlos Museum

by Hal Jacobs

In today's digital age, is there really any difference between viewing high-resolution images of art and seeing the actual piece in front of you?



Emory faculty who rely on the Michael C. Carlos Museum for research and teaching consider themselves fortunate to experience the real thing.

"It's the difference between looking at a full-course meal in a magazine and actually tasting it," says Peter Lacovara, curator of Ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern art and an adjunct professor of art history.

Fellow curator (Greek and Roman art) and adjunct professor Jasper Gaunt answers the question by quoting Robert Graves: "Poetry is what gets lost in translation; art is what gets lost in reproduction."

"If you're in the presence of a great work of art, nothing can substitute for it," adds Gaunt.

In his role as curator, he frequently tries to acquire pieces that fit with a particular faculty's research interests. He points to recent acquisitions: Roman portraits for Eric Varner, associate professor in the departments of art history and classics; for Peter Bing, professor of classics, ancient Greek drinking cups depicting the symposium (unlike today's academic version, the Greek event featured lots of wine); and pieces involving ancient theater for Niall Slater, Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Latin and Greek.

When "the Carlos" (as the museum is popularly known) acquired a vase depicting an actor dressed in a bird costume, Slater was confronted with an intriguing research question: What was the possible

connection between the image on the vase and the comedy *The Birds*, written by Aristophanes in 414 BC?

Slater often works with small vases and fragments to learn more about ancient performance style and costuming. With the vase in front of him, he can carefully examine the images and words on the curved surface—the outlines of figures are actually an added layer of clay—something that can be difficult to capture in a photograph. On this vase the actors are shown wearing similar bird costumes, which raises the question of how different bird species in Aristophanes's play were represented on stage: by costuming or language. "It doesn't fit the way we think the production was staged," says Slater, "but this may be where we let the vase teach us something new."

Corn Beer, Anyone?

One faculty member whose research career has been transformed by objects in the Carlos is Rebecca Stone, associate professor of art history and curator of art of the ancient Americas. She came to Emory in 1988, helped acquire a collection of art (including Costa Rican) that is now among the best in the U.S., and was appointed a faculty member/curator two years later. You might say she was born and raised within view of the Carlos—her father was Dr. Al Stone, for many years chairman of the English department.

In the years before the Carlos became one of the Southeast's premier art museums, it was not unlike most small college collections pieced together by faculty operating on a small budget. Until the mid-1970s, visitors would enter the Emory University Museum (as it was known) via the basement of the Candler School of Theology and find such items as stuffed and mounted animals; excavations from the Etowah Indian Mounds in north Georgia; Egyptian antiquities, including Emory's first mummies; and the first washing machine produced by the Maytag Company.

A new era began for the museum a few years after it moved across the quad to the old law school building, where it joined the departments of art history and anthropology. In 1981, Atlanta businessman and philanthropist Michael C. Carlos funded the renovation of the building and set aside funds for the nascent Greco-Roman collection. Once the art history faculty became more involved as curators—among them Bonna Wescoat in classical art, Gay Robins in Egyptian art, and Stone in the ancient Americas—the museum blossomed as a true learning center for the arts.

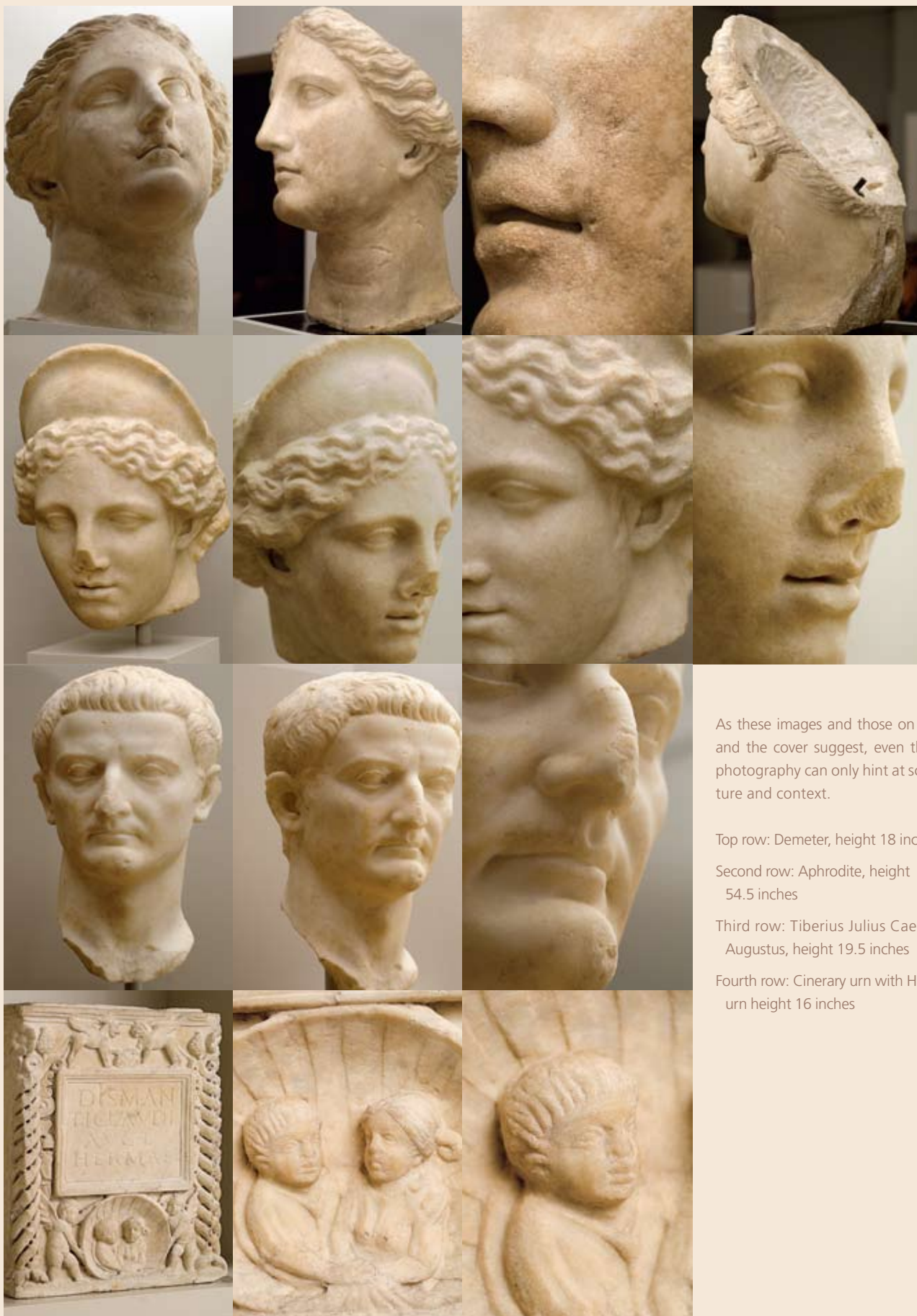
Of course, the Carlos fully arrived with the 1993 grand opening of a new building on the quad designed by renowned architect Michael Graves. The ensuing years have seen the growth of a professional staff of curators and conservators (most with adjunct faculty status in art history) and others who have overseen the development of collections and programming. As the museum has grown in stature, so has its use as a research and teaching resource: in 2007 alone, seventy faculty made visits to the collections with their classes.

"Because this is a university museum, we don't just describe pieces," Stone said recently over lunch at a crowded pasta restaurant in Emory Village. To give an example, she flips open her book *Seeing with New Eyes: Highlights of the Michael C. Carlos Museum Collection of*



Rebecca Stone with ceramic jaguar tripod vessel, Central American, 1000-1350 AD

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As these images and those on page 15 and the cover suggest, even the finest photography can only hint at scale, texture and context.

Top row: Demeter, height 18 inches

Second row: Aphrodite, height 54.5 inches

Third row: Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus, height 19.5 inches

Fourth row: Cinerary urn with Hermes, urn height 16 inches

According to Lacovara, it doesn't matter if you're seeing an object for the first time in its centuries-old hiding place (which he has done) or in a glass case in a museum, what's important is that "the object speaks to you."



Top: Ancient American Female Effigy, 18.25 inches x 11.75 inches x 5 inches

Bottom: Silver tetradrachm coin with images of owl and Athena, Greek, 430-406 BC

Art of the Ancient Americas. She points to a ritual watering vessel from the Inka of South America. Originally nothing was known about the piece—where it came from or how it was used. But after close examination and a lucky break (the piece was broken at the end of its hook), a bit of 500-year-old residue was found inside and a small ear of corn on the shaft was revealed to be molded from the real thing, leaving solid botanical clues.

Stone became obsessed with the piece. "I wasn't going to give up until we figured it out," she said. Her persistence paid off. Four years later, with the help of collaborators on two continents and x-rays at Emory Hospital, she and her team made the piece talk. It turns out that it was used in corn planting rituals in the Chancay Valley of Peru, where priests poked it into the ground

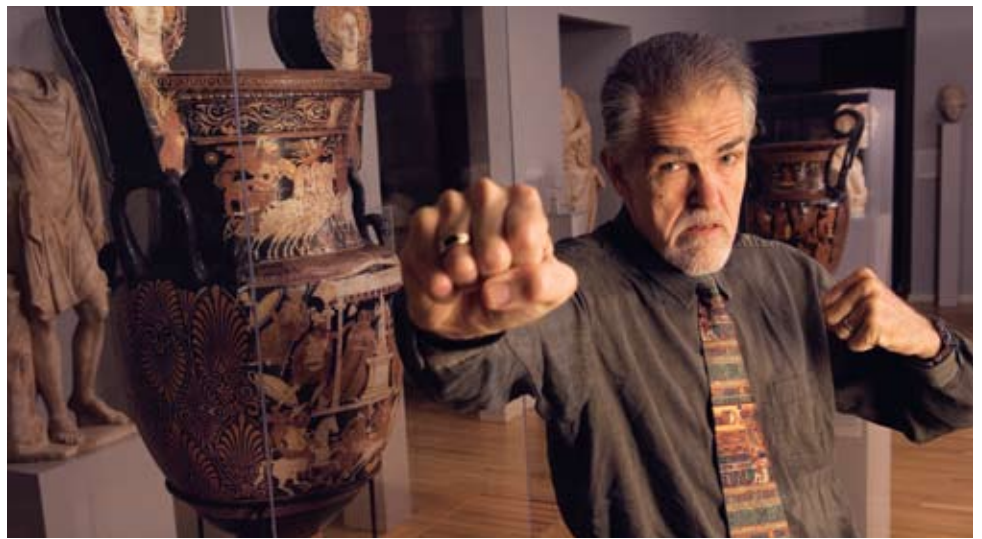
and poured corn beer containing sand through it. The vessel provides a strong, tangible link to a culture that believed you gave to the earth what you wanted to get back from it.

William Size, an associate professor of environmental studies, conducted tests on the residue and also contributed geological analyses to the book. In conversations with curators and faculty, his name frequently turns up. "In a way he's like a practicing artist," says Elizabeth Horner, director of education at the museum. "He can look at a head carved from garnet and talk about the properties of garnet; he can talk about the rarity and hardness of jade. We just acquired a collection of cut gems and hope he'll tell us what the stones are and where they came from."

Getting Inside the Bodies

As a resource, the Carlos resembles Emory's MARBL (Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library) in offering primary materials produced by the hands of working artists that reveal truths about the artists as well as their culture. And as with MARBL, objects in the Carlos inform not only written research but the performing arts. Faculty from theater, religion and dance have been known to stand quietly in front of sculptures, vases and paintings so that their bodies connect with postures in paint and bronze.

As a young actor working in Boston, Tim McDonough, now an associate professor of theater studies and artistic director of Theater Emory, would go to the Museum of Fine Arts and look at the Greek collection for ideas to use



Left: Joyce Flueckiger and Sasikala Penumarthi with bronze Dancing Balakrishna statue, Indian, late 13th-14th c.

Right: Tim McDonough gets physical with Carlos art. Ceramic krater (vessel for mixing wine and water) depicting the sack of Troy, Greek, 330-320 BC

in performance. He once came across an image of a warrior walking behind a captive woman while leading her by the wrist. Later, as Agamemnon leading Cassandra in the *Oresteia*, he recreated that posture.

Last season, when Theater Emory was rehearsing *The Final Hours of Troy*, McDonough brought students to the Carlos to study the bodies and leg positions depicted on various vases and kraters (large vessels for mixing wine and water). Afterwards, the students spent rehearsal time working on some of the poses.

"The task in theater is to try and get inside the bodies and psyches of characters, to inhabit them," says McDonough. "Whether the audience knows that the way your body is configured at this particular moment comes from a vase is not as important as your own sense that this is an image connected with the past. It deepens the sense that you are bringing a truth to the audience."

In a similar way, Joyce Flueckiger, a professor in the religion department, and Sasikala Penumarthi, one of the world's foremost Kuchipudi dancers and an artist affiliate in the dance program, use the Carlos Asia exhibit as a research tool for teaching classical Indian dances, a favorite subject in painting and sculpture. And with Indian-Americans now constituting eighteen percent of the Emory undergraduate population, more students than ever are

interested in finding out about traditional Indian culture, says Flueckiger.

After she began teaching the class "Dance and Embodied Knowledge in the Indian Context" and bringing students to the Carlos, Flueckiger saw a carry-over effect in her research. "Once I required students to view and write about the Asia exhibit, I went back to my own ethnographic research and saw different things. Now I think I take visual culture more seriously."

Currently, three of her graduate students are writing dissertations about Indian dance and using the Carlos as a resource. One of them, Harshita Mruthinti, wrote her undergraduate honors thesis at Emory on the ways that classical Indian dance allows Indian-American young women to experience the goddess at a time when they are not yet performing the rituals of their mothers. Now she has returned to Emory to write a dissertation on the fluidity of gender in classical Telugu literature and dance.

What's the Difference?

In fall 2008, the Carlos plans to introduce Insight, an online presentation software that will make images of many works in the museum's collections available to students and faculty. No doubt this will spur even more involvement with the Carlos's fabulous art, but hopefully not at the cost of less physical contact with the pieces themselves.

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This became clear when he handed me a printed illustration of a thin white piece of Egyptian limestone called an ostrakon, the ancient equivalent of disposable sketch paper. Then, at the end of our meeting, he asked if I would like to see the actual piece in the collection.

A few minutes later we stood in front of the ostrakon in its exhibit case. My eyes had to adjust to its larger size; the small version had lodged in my brain as the "real thing." I was reminded of what Edna Bay, an associate professor in the Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts (ILA), had told me when I asked about the difference between studying reproductions and actual objects. "There's no comparison," said Bay, who included an asen (African sculpture honoring the ancestral dead) from the Carlos in her latest book. "You have no idea of scale in a photograph—it can be very deceptive."

Though I couldn't touch the ostrakon, I could imagine the weight and feel of the rock. The heaviness of the black lines suggested the amount of pressure the artist had applied with his fingers. Thousands of years after being touched by other hands, the piece still felt alive and ready to talk. ∞