Antiquities are objects of great enchantment and fascination. We are fortunate to have a number of important private antiquities collections in Melbourne. The Treasures exhibition features selected rare artefacts, many of which are displayed publicly for the first time, from 11 key private collections. Not only do these intricately crafted works reveal fascinating insights into ancient societies, they also reveal the passions and motivations of the collectors.

Featured here are over 70 items that span 5000 years from ancient Egypt, the Near East, Greece and Rome. Highlights include examples of black- and red-figure vase painting depicting scenes of classical mythology that demonstrate the skilful techniques of Greek and South Italian potters. Delicate vessels made of glass, and miniature bronze statues, exhibit the hallmarks of Roman high-temperature industries. Ancient Egyptian funerary beliefs and the lives of the pharaohs are marked by objects made of faience, wood and alabaster. Bronze ornaments and ceremonial objects, terracotta figurines, and beads made of amber and carnelian, represent markers and symbols of the Near East. Together these works present a broad canvas of the ancient and classical worlds.

The richness and diversity represented by these antiquities highlights distinct artistic, cultural and regional trends. On another level, each object invites viewers to learn more about our ancient ancestors through a consideration of the extraordinary workmanship and creativity they convey.

The University of Melbourne's Classics and Archaeology Collection, which features prominently in the Ian Potter Museum of Art, began in 1901 with a donation of five papyri by the Egypt Exploration Society in London. Our collection has since expanded to include around 5000 items, many acquired through bequests and the benevolence of private donors. This exhibition has been made possible through the generous support of a number of Melbourne private collectors and donors, and we warmly thank them for their continued support of our Classics and Archaeology Gallery activities.
Collecting antiquities

The practice of collecting antiquities began in antiquity itself. Roman statesmen like Cicero and Emperor Hadrian shared a passion for the art of their day and were among its first collectors. Across the Mediterranean, the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt erected the legendary Library of Alexandria to store the books of antiquity, and in the ancient city of Ur, King Nabonidus built a museum to house the objects of his Mesopotamian ancestors.

With the Renaissance came a flourish in antiquities collecting. The famed Kunst-und Wunderkammer began to emerge across Europe in the 16th century. These ‘cabins of curiosities’ became microcosms of the cultural and natural world. The objective was to understand the workings of the cosmos through an encyclopaedia of objects. To aid this pursuit, objects were separated into categories: naturalia, mirabilia (marvels), artefacta, scientifica, exotica and antiquities.

As Europe entered the Enlightenment, antiquities collecting took on new appeal. Science and rationality were the order of the day, and collectors responded by rigorously arranging and cataloguing their objects. In so doing, they began to trace connections between objects throughout ancient history. Over time, this scholarly pursuit became more formalised and in 1717 the Society of Antiquaries of London was founded to promote the study of antiquities. A century later, the practice of collecting had evolved into the disciplines of palaeontology, archaeology, art history and literary studies, and it continues to develop today.

Since the opening of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University in 1683—the first ‘public’ museum—antiquities have occupied a special place in our imagination. Importantly, many private collections have been donated to public institutions, in some cases laying the foundations for world-class public museums. Among the most famous examples are the British Museum, London, the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Other collectors have established privately-run museums to display their art to the public. Tasmania’s recently opened Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), which includes a significant antiquities component alongside modern and contemporary art, serves as an important local example.