



Title *Research in Classical Archaeology*

Description Discussion between Sir John Boardman and Donna Kurtz on the subject of being classical archaeology researchers and academics and some of the challenges and opportunities they face

Presenter(s) John Boardman and Donna Kurtz

Recording <http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/oucs/classics/boardman-kurtz-academia.mp3>

Keywords classics, art, archaeology, academia, beazley archive, teaching, research, V350, Q800, V400, 1

Part of series *The Beazley Archive - Classical Art Research Centre*

Interviewer Let's begin by telling people that I've worked with you for more than 40 years. And one of the things that we've done during that time is transform Sir John [[Beazley's 0:00:11]] paper archive into an online resource that brings our subject to a global audience.

And to us, I think using these podcasts helps us to engage more directly with people who are going to be using the site, and people in the educational world generally.

Perhaps we could begin by looking back over the past 15 years since you retired. Every day you are in your office before eight o' clock. You must have seen many, many changes in this world of scholarship. Could you perhaps talk to us a bit about that?

Respondent Yes, well things change all the time of course. In my office I'm shielded from observing too much about what goes on outside, but it is perfectly clear that life for the average academic researcher and teacher has changed very profoundly. I think in my time there was always time to do a great deal of research, a great deal of teaching, and have lots of students, and still get the publications out without having to take six months off every other year to pretend one's working in a library somewhere or other.

Since – in the last 15 years or so, quite clearly this has not been the case, there's a growing amount of administration, form filling and one thing and another. And it does seem necessary for however well-intentioned a professor or researcher or teacher to look for extra time off to be able to do research and writing. This I think is a very great pity, because teaching and research go together so very closely. To cut oneself off from one to be able to indulge the other doesn't really help a great deal.

Interviewer And – all the time you were a professor, which was perhaps over what, 20 years, how many books did you publish?

Respondent Oh, I don't know. Probably too many.

Interviewer 20, 30, probably too many! Whereas as in my case, having been in this new world order, there is virtually – finding any time to do one's own research is virtually impossible.

Respondent Well some of the things I was doing followed a pattern, and once that pattern was established like the handbooks, it wasn't difficult to keep it going because I was dealing with

material that I'd always been dealing with, and it came perfectly naturally to write about it. Fresh research on new subjects is always another matter and for that, one has to sort of build up a reserve of research and information before you actually sit down and start writing anything.

Interviewer And in Oxford, scholars like us, classical archaeologists, actually belong to two totally different parts of the university. We belong to the Faculty of Classics in Humanities and we also belong to the School of Archaeology in Social Sciences. From your perspective, what sort of challenges and opportunities does this split offer? In fact, if I remember rightly you championed this double life for us quite some time before you retired.

Respondent Yes, it's always been rather a tricky matter, the question of the history of art in the University of Oxford, quite apart from the history of classical art.

Oxford must be honestly the last major university in the world actually to have a professorship in the history of art. It was always blocked for one reason or another. In classics, art was taught from the end of the 19th century, classical art, but purely as an illustration of classical texts. You studied sculpture to elucidate the texts about ancient sculpture, you didn't study classical sculpture for its own sake.

And that attitude only really changed after the Second World War, and after Beazley's retirement with the advent of `[[press rationale 0:04:08]]` in particular. That classical art began to be studied for its own sake, and not totally with reference to texts. That inevitably brought us closer and closer to what one might call the real archaeologists, who had as much or more sympathy with what we were trying to do than the hardcore classicists who were totally devoted to their texts in one form or another.

And it seemed natural after a while because there was more, not necessarily more sympathy but more common approach with the archaeologists to shift a little more in their direction. But without ever totally abandoning the classical side, because one couldn't possibly.

It's a fact which is sometimes in fact forgotten by our classical colleagues that virtually all classical archaeologists, certainly up to say ten years ago, started as straightforward classicists. They know their texts as well as anybody else, and what they have done is added a dimension to their understanding of the ancient world by looking at the physical evidence for its art and the way it expresses itself in things other than texts.

So, there's a certain split, there's a certain struggle here going on. We are not only contributing to the study of world art and archaeology by associating ourselves with the archaeologists, but we are trying to explain to the rest of the classical world that there's much more out there than the texts of Homer and Euripides. And if they want to understand the context in which the classics in the traditional sense has been understood, they've got to go far, far away from the texts and start looking at other things as well.

So this is what we've been really, as it were, fighting for and pushing for, and with I think some considerable success.

Interviewer Of course British universities are largely funded by the government, which means under a government initiative, the recent government promotion of 'impact' as a means of assessing scholarship have caused what the British like to call "a farce", a very, very big farce. From your perspective, is impact assessment a good thing, is it a bad thing, is there any medium line here?

Respondent Well I think it's pretty clearly a bad thing, and I think most people in most universities would agree to that unless their department and their work is totally committed to something which they rely upon the government funding because it appears to serve government purposes.

The idea that scholarship is worthwhile in its own right, the scholarship and understanding of even remote antiquity and the beginnings of man is one which has generally been accepted by the

civilised world for a very long time, and I don't see how any government today can abandon this attitude. They can appear to in an attempt to save money, but it is destructive of the civilisation which they are meant to be trying to uphold.

I suppose one could produce some funny argument saying that archaeology and the study of art is helpful for the economy in that it encourages people to look at objects, look at museums, preserve ancient sites. It occupies a great deal of time for instance on television, therefore one can say that it has a certain impact in that respect. These are valid arguments but basically totally bogus when it comes to the questions of absolute scholarship, what one is trying to do.

The people sitting in a back room somewhere worrying away at a list of millions of numbers are in fact contributing a very great deal to our general understanding of the history of man. And that should be of importance to anyone, even to a modern government.

Interviewer A month or so ago, I put in a major grant application to a British funding agency and I was asked to write two pages on impact of my project, and then I was invited, which meant that if I didn't do it I certainly wouldn't get the grant, to write another two pages. In actual fact, although I didn't like doing this, I found that because of the public access work we've done with the Beazley archive, and trying to get to a global audience, that I was actually able to as it were tick the boxes of the impact statement.

So I, from my perspective it's not a totally bad thing.

Respondent No, it's not a bad thing in that respect, and the fact that we are, as they say now, reaching out to, more to schools or even beyond, not exactly to the cradle as yet, is a very good thing. But what we're doing is in the long run to improve public awareness of culture and civilisation which goes something beyond pensions and relief or whatever it might be, is a good thing, it's part of our function I think of any Humanities department.

And if we can concede – we succeed in doing this by bringing the sort of material that we deal with and we enjoy and work with to the attention of the broader public, this is obviously a very good thing. But this shouldn't dictate what we do. Our agenda is to make as full and proper and intelligible understanding of antiquity as we possibly can, and it mustn't be dictated by the need to have on a, readily accessible on a cell phone for instance, immediate information about what a red picker vase is or something like this.

This is a by-product which is very useful, but this should not dictate what we do and how we do it.

Interviewer Oh, absolutely not but I am terribly keen to develop an iPod App for classical art, so that people who go into a museum, on their mobile device can immediately have access to the highest quality information.

Respondent Yes, yes, but that mustn't dictate what we do.

Interviewer Oh, not at all, it's a by-product.

Respondent It's a by-product.

Interviewer And it means that people like us simply must be prepared to give more of our time for the education of a wider public, for the public benefit.

Respondent I think in our area, classical art and archaeology, we're doing that all the time. Not only through the sort of mechanical process of creating databases, spreading pictures around the world and giving people access to it and all the rest of it. But in books and publication, which are after all still read and bought.

In attitudes which are then passed via those books to museum curators, the way displays are laid out, this sort of thing. The sort of general books which are issued very often nowadays to non-academic books which are based on academic knowledge, there's a great spate of novels about detective stories in ancient Rome and what have you. And they go on a great deal, there's a lot of magic and excitement in antiquity which is not purely historical, but also visual, and we are able to provide that excitement.

You look at the ordinary, average newspaper, from time to time Sunday newspapers, pages or half pages will be devoted to looking at what has just been found out about the remote antiquity of man, what he has managed to achieve. With sometimes sort of between the lines, "Well have we done any better?"

Interviewer Well I think we're very lucky in that we have a wonderful subject.

Respondent True enough, I think it is a brilliant subject.

© 2010 University of Oxford, John Boardman and Donna Kurtz

This transcript is released under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 2.0 UK: England & Wales Licence. It can be reused and redistributed globally provided that it is used in a non-commercial way and the work is attributed to the licensors. If a person creates a new work based on the transcript, the new work must be distributed under the same licence. Before reusing, adapting or redistributing, please read and comply with the full licence available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/uk/>