

Sydney University

MUSEUMS

Newsletter



Issue 3

June 2004

Macleay transformed



For the past nine months the curators of the Macleay Museum have been developing an exhibition scheme to replace all the existing long-term displays. Birds, bugs and beasts will jostle with Aboriginal shields, Pacific Island masks, curious microscopes and early photographs to explore the origins of the museum and reveal the diversity of its collections.

This is the story not just of objects but of the people behind them. Prominent among these are several members of the Macleay family in the late 1700s and 1800s. The insect collection that Alexander Macleay brought to Sydney from London in 1826 represented a huge investment of time and money over the previous 20 or 30 years. It was the finest collection of insects in the world at the time. Alexander was at the centre of natural history activity in London for a quarter of a century as honorary secretary of the Linnean Society. Remarkable specimens from his collection will feature in the new exhibition scheme.

The collection was extended by Alexander's son, William Sharp Macleay, and his nephew, Sir William John Macleay. The exhibition tells their stories and stories of many of the people with

whom they were associated. One of these was T.H. Huxley, the young assistant surgeon on a British Naval vessel, HMS *Rattlesnake*, which visited Sydney several times in the late 1840s. Intent on developing a scientific career, Huxley was much encouraged in his research on marine organisms by William Sharp Macleay. Lesser known figures such as J. Archibald Boyd, a planter in Fiji, aided William John Macleay in the development of his ethnographic collection. The specimens and artefacts on display will give the visitor a window into many aspects of the culture of science over the past centuries.

The well-known design firm of Hewitt Pender Associates has been contracted to design and produce the new exhibition. While most of the original cedar cases will remain in position, a large new glass case will provide a dramatic centrepiece to the museum, which will allow larger objects to be displayed. The Macleay Museum has been closed for the refit and will reopen on 20 July.



A word from the Director



In this issue we introduce the new displays in the Macleay Museum. The museum closed in mid May and will re-open in late July with displays focusing on the history and stories of the collections and collectors who gathered them. Some of the museum's most treasured items will be on display.

Working with 19th century display cases has provided our designers and curators with many challenges. That these cases have survived intact over the past 125 years has more to do with their size than a deliberate act to retain the 19th ambience that is now an attraction in itself. They simply cannot be physically removed from the museum. The cases were installed into the current space about 1920 when the floors of the once grand interior of the Macleay building were in-filled to allow more space for teaching. Just prior to the last slab of concrete being laid, the 22 cases were

hailed up through the remaining hole in the floor and into the museum where they have remained.

As well as replacing long-term displays, we are also making improvements to the temporary display space in the Macleay Museum. The first exhibition in the renovated space will feature the digital photographs of artist Robyn Stacey. Robyn has been working closely with the Macleay Museum for the past couple of years, producing a body of work that uses images of natural history specimens, some of which have been digitally manipulated, to reflect on and reinterpret late 18th and 19th century collecting and classifying traditions and aesthetics.

Behind the scenes, we are improving storage conditions in both the Nicholson and Macleay museums, starting with the ethnographic collections of the Macleay. These collections, while cared for, are stored in very cramped conditions that make it difficult to inspect individual items. The improvements will provide greater access for study and research.

David Ellis
Director

Museums Light Up Sydney!



Facing the dead

On 29 July Dr John Prag of the University of Manchester, England, will present a lecture titled *Have I Gazed Upon the Face of Agamemnon? Reconstructing Ancient Faces*. John Prag is keeper of archaeology at Manchester Museum. Much of the groundbreaking work in facial reconstruction using ancient human remains has been pioneered by Prag and a team at Manchester University. In using the technique to answer archaeological and historical problems they have demonstrated family relationships between the

occupants of the rich grave circles at Mycenae. His lecture will journey from Mycenae to Macedonia, where reconstruction of the skull found in Tomb II at Vergina succeeded in identifying the occupant as King Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. The lecture has been organised by the Friends of the Nicholson Museum and will be followed by a reception in the Nicholson Museum and a viewing of the new exhibition *Troy: Age of Heroes*. For those interested in attending more information is available by phoning 9351 2812.

More than 600 visitors enjoyed the ambience of the historic quadrangle, the Nicholson Museum and the University Art Gallery on 17 April during the inaugural evening of Museums Light Up Sydney! an event in which 25 of the city's museums opened their doors between 6pm and midnight.

The evening was a great success and it is hoped it will become an annual event on Sydney's cultural calendar.

Highlights were performances of ancient music by *Melismos* in the Nicholson Museum, talks by artist Suzanne Archer about her current exhibition

Horses for Courses at the University Gallery and performances on the Carillon by University carillonneur Jill Forrest. A special thankyou to all staff and volunteers who assisted in making the night a success.

Sightseeing in China

International partnerships with universities in Asia are a valuable aspect of the University Museums' work, including developing collections and touring exhibitions. The Art Collection holds a significant collection of contemporary Chinese prints, which has grown through acquisitions made with the Morrissey Bequest Fund.

During 2001, art curator Sioux Garside and professor of art history and theory John Clark travelled to China, visiting Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai on a research and art buying trip for the fund. During that visit significant connections were made with many academics, artists and curators, especially those who teach at China Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, the foremost art and design school in China.

In May this year Sioux returned to CAFA as the invited curator of *Sightseeing*, a comprehensive exhibition of art by academics who teach at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA) at the University of Sydney. SCA's dean Professor Ron Newman initiated the concept of a two-part exhibition exchange with CAFA and secured seed funding through the University's International Office. He invited Sioux Garside and CAFA's academic director (international) Professor Tan Ping to curate exchange exhibitions that would facilitate a cultural dialogue on art theories and practices between the two institutions. *Sightseeing* is the result, an exhibition of selected photography, installation works, paintings, sculptures, ceramics, glass, video and print media by 16 artists who represent the diversity of art practice at SCA.

Sioux attended the opening and helped SCA gallery manager and project coordinator Kate Major to install the exhibition in CAFA's gallery in downtown Beijing. While in China, Sioux also investigated potential Chinese acquisitions for the Morrissey Bequest Fund and visited the Dashanzi International Art Fair. Also travelling to Beijing for the exhibition were glass artist Jane Gavan and computer artist Josephine Starrs, two of the artists represented in the exhibition. They contributed to the teaching program at CAFA.



Professor Tan Ping with University of Sydney art curator Sioux Garside at the launch of *Sightseeing* at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing

Tan Ping and artists from CAFA are visiting Sydney in June for the Chinese *Sightseeing* exhibition to be displayed in the University Art Gallery and the SCA galleries. The cultural exchange, financially supported by both universities, aims to increase the understanding of the issues, values and ideas that preoccupy contemporary art and popular culture in both Australia and China.

Sioux suggested a curatorial theme for the selection of works that introduces theories about visual perception and technological change. Many of these artists explore contrasting ways that our experiences, imaginations, and ideas have been affected by new information technologies, especially the transformative qualities of computers, digital and print reproduction processes.

Comprising more than 50 works, the exhibition ranges in style and media from the subtle datafield text patterns printed on beige felt by Justin Trendall to Andrew Hurle's graphic and mesmerising, all-seeing radiant 'eyes' synthesised by using the vector computer software employed for making banknotes. These prints highlight the role of printed ornament in 'overseeing' the value of paper currency, especially as money dematerialises and evolves toward pure digital numeracy.

While the title *Sightseeing* is meant to suggest several layers of meaning, initially it is an invitation for viewers to enjoy and discover unfamiliar art works through the process of looking, much in the way we experience new places and are able to discover cultural differences when sightseeing. As CAFA president Professor Pan Gongkai says, "Today, the trend of globalisation offers us more and more chances to 'sightsee' other cultural traditions, and at the same time, bring both sides to a cross-nation/cross-culture and global view, which will absolutely contribute to expanding the dialogue space between different cultures. 'Sightseeing' is a really interesting metaphor. The cultural 'landscape' is here in this exhibition and its visitors are from a different cultural context. How will visitors judge art in this cross-cultural exchange?"



A detail from Josephine Starrs's and Leon Cmielewski's ironic video *a.k.a. - meaning 'also known as'* - which comments on the impact of surveillance video technology in countries around the world and projects the inventive ways that people may adapt and alter their personal identities using wigs, makeup, clothes and other disguises to change gender or ethnicity

Continued overleaf

Sightseeing continued



Debra Dawes's *Unfinished Business* being installed at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing

Sioux hopes that Chinese visitors will respond favourably to the underlying theories and ideas that artists raise about the nature of our experiences as spectators and participants while enjoying the visual aesthetics of these expressive artworks. In-depth essays by both curators feature in the substantial and well-illustrated bilingual catalogue which in itself provides a valuable opportunity to internationally profile the work of two globally focused art institutions. When the Australian *Sightseeing* returns to Sydney later this year and is displayed at SCA, Sydney audiences will also be able to 'sightsee' these engaging and thought-provoking artworks.

Sightseeing Beijing will be displayed at the University Art Gallery, 23 June – 22 August, and at the Sydney College of the Arts galleries, 24 June – 13 August.

Horses for Courses



The exhibition of Suzanne Archer's drawings, paintings and sculptures inspired by the teaching environment of the Faculty of Veterinary Science was launched on 21 April. *Horses for Courses* was launched by University's chief financial officer Bob Kotic. He is shown here with the Deputy Chancellor Emeritus Professor Ann Sefton AO and Matt Hall, a Fellow of the University Senate. Suzanne Archer also spoke at the launch.



New face at Nicholson

Michael Turner has been appointed acting assistant curator of the Nicholson Museum until February 2005 while Dr Karin Sowada is on maternity leave. Over the past year Michael has been working with Professor Alexander Cambitoglou in the

preparation of the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, a listing of the museum's holdings of South Italian pottery. Michael is a graduate of the University and is currently completing his doctoral thesis on the god Dionysos.



Visitor from Vanuatu

On a recent visit to Sydney, Ralph Regenvanu, Director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, visited the Macleay Museum to meet the director and staff and to look at some Vanuatu objects in the collections. He is pictured with Susie Davies (curator of ethnography) and Rosemary Stack (curator, Indigenous heritage) looking at a wooden mask from Epi Island.

Mr Regenvanu is also secretary of the Pacific Islands Museums Association; a member of the executive board of the Asia-Pacific Committee of the International Council of Museums; and an international adviser to two UNESCO programs: the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity Program and the Memory of the World Program.

Troy: Age of Heroes



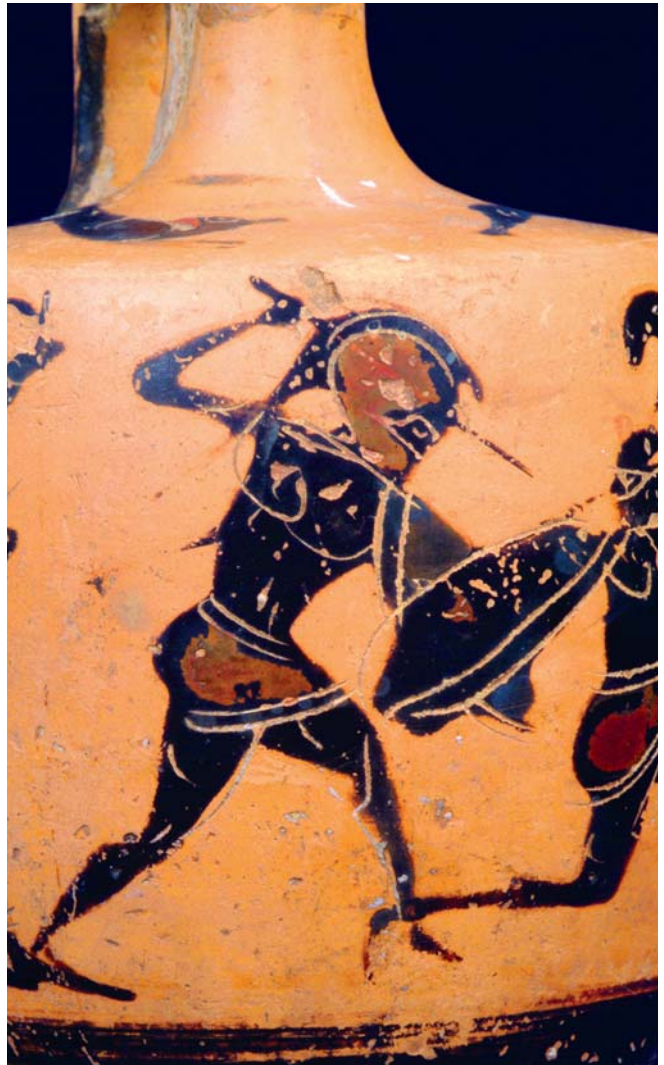
The release of the movie *Troy*, starring Brad Pitt as Achilles and Eric Bana as Hektor will do untold good in generating interest in the Ancient World. With this in mind, a new exhibition entitled *Troy: Age of Heroes* opened at the Nicholson Museum in May.

The exhibition is specifically narrative in its concept which has already proved enormously appealing to visiting school groups. Using a variety of artefacts from the museum's collection, it concentrates on several bloody episodes from this bloodiest of wars: the death of Troilos at the hands of Achilles, the death of Sarpedon, the rape of Cassandra,



the death of Agamemnon, and the departure of Hektor to his death at the hands of ... oops, I nearly gave the ending away!

Right, detail of Attic black figure lekythos (inv. no. 49.07)



Harry Potter is 2350 years old!

J. K. Rowling is famous for her use of Greek mythology as an inspiration for some of her characters and creatures. In the Nicholson Museum, in the suitably Hogwarts-like surroundings of the Quad, is this fragmentary image of a Harry Potter-esque character on a hippogriff. Well, a young Dionysos on a griffin to be more exact! But then again, the pair do have a surprising lot in common.

Together with this fragment is a very unusual South Italian ritual drinking cup in the shape of a griffin's head with an image of the actual animal



South Italian rhyton, about 350BC (inv. no. 98.71)

South Italian krater fragment about 380BC (inv. no. AC.34)

Conservator to Sharjah

Nicholson Museum conservator Jo Atkinson recently spent a working vacation in Sharjah on the western coast of the United Arab Emirates. The city is known as the 'Cultural Capital of the Arab World'. Jo had been invited to work for two months in the Sharjah Archaeological Museum. The emirate is small, but incredibly rich in archaeological terms. Jo worked on the conservation of spectacular Bronze Age weaponry from local sites and occasionally visited sites to watch the progress of foreign

teams in the field, helping out when particularly fragile objects were uncovered.

The Ruler of Sharjah, His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, is currently developing a new Islamic Museum in Sharjah and Jo was quickly seconded to work on material destined for installation there. The courtyard of a 200-year-old house within the walls of the ancient city became a laboratory for conserving glazed ceramic vessels, delicate glass jars and elaborate copper alloy candlesticks.



An Islamic glazed ceramic bowl, destined for the new Sharjah Islamic Museum, after restoration

Ancient coinage

In April, the Australian Society of Ancient Numismatics (ASAN), the ancient coin collectors' club, met at the Nicholson Museum. Dr Nicholas Hardwick presented a talk about the history of the museum's coin collection. He outlined the major figures who had built up the collection, including Sir Charles Nicholson, Arthur B. Triggs and Professor James Stewart.

Significant Greek and Roman coins from the collection were shown, as well as numismatic books from Fisher Library. Of particular interest were rare books collected by Professor Stewart while he was a prisoner of war in Germany, which bear official stamps of the German authorities.

An Athenian silver tetradrachm (inv.no. 103.250/2) dating from the second half of the fifth century BC. It is one of 13 similar coins from a hoard found in Egypt, which were bought by Professor James Stewart in 1949.



Deciphering a coffin

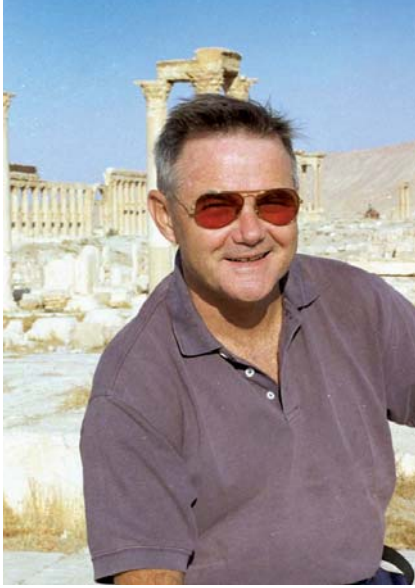
Andreas König, from the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, was recently in Sydney to conduct research on a large decorated cedar coffin in the Nicholson Museum. Dating to the early 7th century BC, the coffin (Inv. R29) is of a man called Mer-neit-ies, and comes from the Saqqara necropolis near modern-day Cairo. It was acquired by Sir Charles Nicholson during his visit to Egypt in 1856–1857, and was

subsequently part of his original donation to the University in 1860.

The coffin, now on display in the museum's Egyptian Gallery, contains disturbed body parts of a mummy (or several mummies) which have not yet been the subject of any investigations.

Andreas is completing a master's degree on the coffin and related types under the supervision of Dr Regine Schultz, Curatorial Director of the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, USA.





Essington bark

Australian Aboriginal art today commands international interest. The works of current Aboriginal artists are often on a large scale and sell for high prices. These works use modern materials and are sometimes influenced by Western ideas and yet they have developed from a tradition that reaches back before European contact. Europeans exploring northern Australia in the 19th century reported that the interiors of Aboriginal bark shelters were decorated with paintings. The Macleay Museum holds a small group of bark paintings which are among the oldest surviving paintings from the region.



Links with the past

Retirement has brought Ross Burns back in contact with the Nicholson Museum. In his time as Australian Ambassador to Greece (1998–2001), Ross was patron of the Athens Friends of the Australian Archaeological Institute in Athens, and now serves on the Council of the Institute, which is a University of Sydney Foundation.

Ross graduated from Sydney in 1966, majoring in history but with some archaeological experience along the way. Ross's association with the Nicholson was strengthened by a couple of stints working on the museum's reconstruction during term breaks when it quickly became apparent that his career did not lie in mending pots. Although his great fascination was with Near Eastern archaeology (he fell a youthful victim to C.W. Ceram's *Gods, Graves and Scholars* thoughtlessly awarded

as a school prize!), he sampled various other eras and, encouraged by a year of Indian history under Marjorie Jacobs, found himself diverted to the Commonwealth Department of External Affairs, now Foreign Affairs and Trade.

During his diplomatic career Ross managed to fit in postings to several East Mediterranean countries with the occasional weekend excursion crammed in. His continuing interest in archaeology led him to write the first modern survey of Syria's numerous archaeological sites, *Monuments of Syria* (1992). He has followed up with a history of Damascus, a pioneering attempt in English to describe the city's long past, to be published later this year by Routledge. Now in retirement Ross is contemplating a second career as a PhD student – in, of course, archaeology.

On 26 August 1878, Dr James C Cox exhibited 11 Aboriginal bark paintings at a meeting of the Linnean Society of New South Wales in Sydney. Described and illustrated in the Society's *Proceedings* in the same year, Cox stated that they "were obtained from the natives on Essington Island, on the north coast of Australia". While no island of that name is known to have existed, stylistically they are similar to other 19th century barks recorded from the Port Essington area. The 'X-ray' technique, infilling some figures or animals, is a feature of the most recent rock art sequence of western Arnhem Land, beginning more than 4000 years ago.

Presumably part of Cox's private ethnological collection by August 1878, the 'Essington Island' paintings appear to have passed into Sir William John Macleay's hands sometime after their display at the Linnean Society meeting and before the opening of the Sydney International Exhibition in November 1879, where Cox displayed a large number of ethnological items from his private collection. That Cox did not exhibit the 'Essington Island' paintings at the Exhibition suggests Macleay may have already acquired them by then.

In 1884, only a few years after the 'Essington Island' paintings were first described, five paintings were removed by Captain Frederick Carrington from inside a bark shelter on Field Island, near the mouth of the south Alligator River. This has led several researchers to suggest that the 'Essington Island' paintings were acquired in the same manner. While the circumstances surrounding the collection of the 'Essington Island' barks remain unclear, the evidence suggests that they probably once adorned the walls of a bark shelter. As such, they represent an artform free of European influence.

In 1912, Walter Baldwin Spencer, then Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, removed some 'slabs' containing paintings, which formed the walls of bark shelters at Oenpelli. Spencer was so interested by them, that he commissioned "two or three of the best artists" to paint a series of canvases or 'barks', leaving the choice of subject matter to the artist. The size of the work determined the number of sticks of tobacco given in payment. From this time on, bark paintings were increasingly made specifically for anthropologists, missionaries and other collectors.

All but one of the 'Essington Island' paintings shown by Cox in 1878 is held in the Macleay Museum. One of these features in the museum's new exhibition scheme open from late July. The bark appears to show a cassowary or emu, painted with ochre and white pigment on a slab of bark 64cm x 31cm (P997).

Starting young

For the first time, the Nicholson Museum's School Education Program has developed a special teaching unit for NSW primary schools (Years 1-6) focusing on archaeology and the museum's collection. This new unit has generated much interest among teachers and in schools that have never been to the museum before, with the

result that bookings have been very strong.

Primary school children are taught about archaeology in a fun way, which includes the ever-popular hands-on session with artefacts from the reserve collection, along with activities such as learning how the ancient Egyptians embalmed and wrapped mummies.

Going home

Macleay Museum

Macleay Building, Gosper Lane off Science Road

Open Monday to Friday: 10am to 4.30pm

Closed on public holidays. Admission free.

Phone: 02 9351 2274

Fax: 02 9351 5646

Email: macleay@macleay.usyd.edu.au

Website: www.usyd.edu.au/su/macleay

Exhibition: Robyn Stacey: *Recent Work*

Until 29 October

Also new exhibition interpreting the origins and collections of the museum

Nicholson Museum

By the southern entrance to the Quadrangle

Open Monday to Friday: 10am to 4.30pm

Closed on public holidays. Admission free.

Phone: 02 9351 2812

Fax: 02 9351 4889

Website: www.usyd.edu.au/su/nicholson

Exhibition: *Ancient Voices – Modern Echoes:*

Theatre in the Greek World

Until September

Also *Troy: Age of Heroes* and permanent displays of Egyptian, Classical, Near Eastern and Cypriot antiquities

University Art Collection

University Art Gallery, Quadrangle

Open Tuesdays to Thursdays: noon to 4pm. Admission free.

Phone: 02 9351 4004

Fax: 02 9351 7785

Website: www.usyd.edu.au/su/uniart

Exhibition: *Sightseeing Beijing*

23 June – 22 August



The University returned Ancestral Remains to the Aboriginal community of Dareton at a special ceremony in April.

Dareton is on the lower Murray River in south-western NSW. The remains were collected in various locations in Barkindji country, including a showground and a river bank, and had been in the University since the early 1950s.

The acting deputy vice-chancellor, Professor Michael Fry, handed back the remains of 10 individuals to representatives of the Barkindji Elders Committee, Ms Christine Kelly, Ms Peggy Thomas, and Ms Maryann Martin. It was a moving occasion. "I feel at peace now," Ms Thomas remarked. "We've got the bodies and we can release them back to their own land."

The visit of the Barkindji elders to Sydney was facilitated by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service within the Department of Environment and Conservation. While in Sydney the elders also participated in a repatriation ceremony at the Australian Museum.

The University has conducted a repatriation project since 1994 and has returned remains to communities across Australia. The project is managed by the Indigenous Heritage Curator Rosemary Stack, based at the Macleay Museum. "The return of remains is a hugely significant event. The remains have often been at the University for a long time, and sometimes the communities don't realise the significance of it until they actually come to view or collect the remains."

Locality Guide

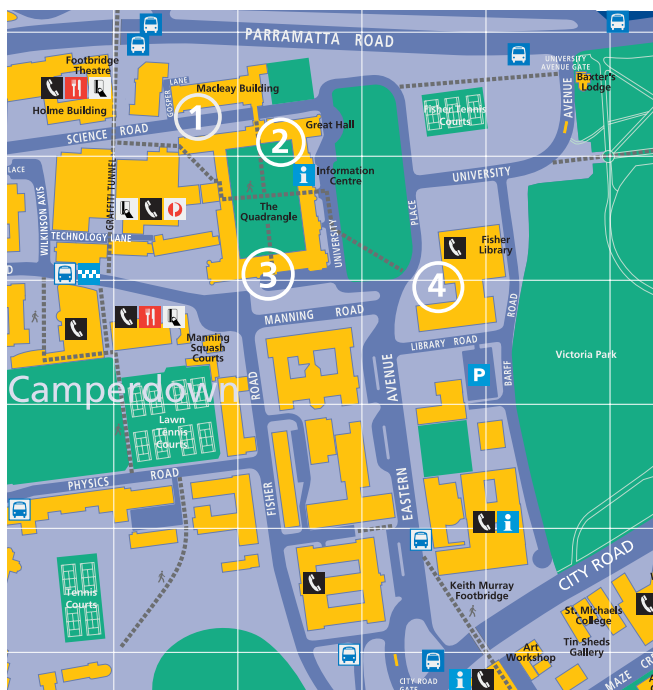
Key

1: Macleay Museum,

3: Nicholson Museum

2: University Art Gallery

4: Fisher Library



The University of Sydney

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