

# HASS506 Significance Assessment Example Proposal

**Student Name**

**Student Number**

## **Project Title**

Significance and MA1969.2.1-2: Roman Earrings

## **Research Question**

To research and write a *Significance Assessment* for an object held in the collections of the University of New England's Museum of Antiquities (UNEMA). The object selected is MA1969.2.1-2, Roman gold earrings from Syria, c.3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.



MA1969.2.1-2 Roman gold earrings from Syria, c.3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

## **Aims**

A statement of significance is a summary of the value and meanings placed upon collections and items by individuals and communities.<sup>1</sup> Assessing significance is important as it allows for a deeper engagement with existing collections and promotes an understanding of ideas, cultures and the people connected to material items. Moreover, investigating an item's provenance, context, artistic and technical development, and comparing it with similar objects from other collections, provides a greater understanding and appreciation of history in general.<sup>2</sup> This research project aims to advance our knowledge of an artefact from UNEMA's ancient Rome collection, thereby contributing to the museum's collections management, and teaching and community engagement programs.

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\* Nadin, K., *Significance and MA1969.2.1-2: Roman Earrings*, UNEMA 2017, draft provided with permission.

<sup>1</sup> Roslyn Russell, Kylie Winkworth, *Significance 2.0: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Collections*, South Australia, 2009. p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Russell, Winkworth, *Significance 2.0: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Collections*, p.10.

Artefacts of a personal nature not only build upon the information provided by other remains such as buildings, paintings and coinage but also help to fill the gaps left by the written sources. The artefact selected from the museum's collection – MA1969.2.1-2: a pair of Roman gold earrings from Syria c.3<sup>rd</sup> century AD – are significant not just in terms of the material used in their construction and overall condition, but also for what they tell us about the appearance of Roman women. Furthermore, the techniques used by artisans, the cultural and artistic influences on jewellery-making and the arts in general, funerary practices, provincial administration, laws relating to the use and display of expensive materials and social stratification will be researched and analysed. A survey of the importance of personal artefacts like jewellery in advancing our knowledge across a range of areas relating to Roman society, art, empire and law will thus be presented.

This project also represents a research capstone experience for the Master of History coursework and will contribute to the development of a professional creative practice portfolio. It will enable me to demonstrate the acquisition of the MHIST coursework's learning outcomes of applying specialised and advanced knowledge, independent research and the synthesis of ideas to develop creative, autonomous and extended written arguments.<sup>3</sup>

### **Methodology**

A crucial component of assessing 'significance' is explaining why an object is important. As the state of significance is dynamic and relative to a community's or researcher's interests and background, a set of steps and criteria have been established by the Collections Council of Australia Ltd to allow for more accurate and consistent analysis, ultimately enabling managers to make reasoned decisions about the importance and meaning of items.<sup>4</sup> The criteria used when assessing significance are a broad framework of values relevant to collections in Australia and include historic, artistic and aesthetic, scientific and social or spiritual value.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, four

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<sup>3</sup> *HASS506 Research Project: Additional Information*, Course and Unit Information, University of New England, <https://my.une.edu.au/courses/2017/units/HUMS507>, accessed 28 May 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Russell, Winkworth, pp.10-12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

comparative criteria allows judgements to be made about the degree of significance – provenance, rarity or representativeness, condition and interpretive capacity.<sup>6</sup>

The steps for single item significance assessment outlined in the guide will form the basis of the methodology used to write the statement:

1. Collate a file with all the information about the item and its history
2. Research its history and provenance
3. Consult donors, owners and knowledgeable people
4. Research the context of the item
5. Analyse and describe its condition
6. Compare with similar items
7. Identify related places and items
8. Assess significance against primary and comparative criteria:  
Primary: historic, artistic and aesthetic, research potential and social.  
Comparative: provenance, rarity or representativeness, condition and interpretive capacity.
9. Summarise the item's meanings and values in a statement of significance
10. List recommendations and actions.<sup>7</sup>

## **Results**

The project will produce a 6,000 word file on the artefact and its socio-historical context to be included in the UNEMA Collections Management System (CMS) “PastPerfect.” This file will be available to UNEMA to inform all future research, teaching, and community outreach undertaken by UNEMA in relation to artefact MA1969.2.1-2.

The project will also produce a Significance Assessment for MA1969.2.1-2. This assessment of significance of 1,000 words will be a double-sided A4 sheet that may be used by UNEMA for teaching, exhibition, grant application, and future publication purposes. It will also be entered into the PastPerfect CMS file for object MA1969.2.1-2.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

### **Preliminary Annotated Bibliography**

Preliminary research utilises works including catalogues for the British Museum, Significance2.0, object file notes, and academic literature addressing both the specific cultural and artistic history of Roman jewellery, as well as broader aspects including the use of adornment in denoting class, the position of women, funerary practices, Hellenistic influences, and provincial administration.

**Russell R., Winkworth K., *Significance 2.0: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Collections*, Collections Council of Australia Ltd, South Australia, 2009.**

*Significance 2.0* outlines the theory behind, and practice, of assessing significance in a standardised process. It provides example significance statements and case studies and has become an invaluable tool for collecting organisations across Australia.

**Higgins R.A., *Greek and Roman Jewellery*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1961.**

Higgin's text is a broad survey of the technical processes, geographical details and historical development of ancient jewellery and includes information about the different types of Roman earrings with clear plates of each.

**Marshall F.H., *Catalogue of Jewellery from the British Museum: Greek, Etruscan and Roman*, Trustees of the British Museum, Oxford, 1968.**

Similar to Higgin's text in that it presents an overview of technical processes and the artistic influences on Roman jewellery, it also lists, describes and includes an image of every artefact the museum holds in its jewellery collection. It will therefore assist in both describing the earrings using a standard catalogue formula and allow comparisons with similar items from important and extensive collections.

**D'Ambra E., *Roman Women*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.**

This text examines the daily lives of Roman women. It draws upon a range of written primary sources, material culture and fine arts to demonstrate what they can tell us about the nature of women's lives and attitudes towards them. While D'Ambra explains that the cultivation of physical appearance was not necessarily just a female concern, she highlights the complex moral codes for female beauty and adornment and implies that jewellery was a way for women to reinforce their position. Extensive discussion of funerary goods and comparisons to mummy portraiture will be useful in

demonstrating the purpose and thus significance of items such as the gold earrings from the UNEMA's collection.

**Kleiner D.E.E, Matheson S.B., *I Claudia: Women in Roman Art & Society*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2000.**

This collection of academic readings accompanied the Yale University Art Gallery exhibition *I, Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*. It contains readings on topics including gender theory, portraiture, women's roles in society and most usefully, jewellery and funerary customs.

**Ando, C., 'The administration of the Provinces' in Potter, D.S., (ed.) *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2006.**

The earrings are from the Roman province of Syria, allowing for a discussion of the reach and influence of the Empire. Ando's reading provides a good overview of how the Romans administered the provinces and explains how they used local aristocracies as *instrumenta servitutis*. The earrings may have belonged to one such local aristocratic woman.

### **Ancient Sources**

The following is by no means an exhaustive list of Roman literary sources. They attest that adornment and beautification were a topic worthy of discussion and debate, and, in the case of the sumptuary laws, regulation. All translations provided, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the Loeb Classical Library:

Livy *Histories*

Ovid, *Arts of Love*

Juvenal *Satire VI*

Martial *Epigrams*

Justinian *Institutes*

Gaius *Institutes*