

CITY GIFTS



CURATED BY PROF ADRIAN FRANKLIN

Governing cities is a complex business and requires visits and meetings at every level. As a result of this, Melbourne's collection can be divided into a ranked hierarchy of gifts. Some high level delegations may arrive with a team of officials and during their visit a number of gift exchanges might be made from the extraordinary high status gifts from political leaders, to the less flamboyant but nonetheless iconic 'objects of virtue' made by the very best crafts people from the visiting cities and exchanged between high level officials. Then there are lower level objects in the hierarchy of gifts that are produced to represent the city corporations themselves: these include such things as models of buildings, shields and coats of arms and keys to the city. Finally, there are the more informal souvenirs that are exchanged between 'opposite numbers' during major visits as well as more routine meetings and business. Seemingly less impressive, their role is nonetheless significant.



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As a major world city Melbourne has established gift exchange partnerships with a similar range of high status cities elsewhere and the exhibition will begin by identifying and displaying several high status gifts from its collection. The choice of high status gifts is extremely interesting and includes some strange choices such as live animals and gardens. As the historian Keith Thomas (1983:277) points out 'Exotic animals had always been prized possessions and an appropriate gift for one ruler to bestow on another'.

The gift of koalas from Melbourne Zoo to Tennoji Zoo in the Sister City of Osaka, for example, was particularly well timed given 'koala mania' in Japan following the 1984 Federal Government gift of 6 koalas, and especially in light of the subsequent ban on the sale and exports of koalas.

The historic association of high status and animal gifts provides some context for the gift of the large bronze of a wolf mother suckling Romulus and Remus from Prince Boncampagni, Governor of Rome, in honour of the Centenary of Melbourne, and a token of friendship from the City of Rome, in 1934.

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The high status of Melbourne is also recognized by being visited by major world leaders who will typically give a suitable gift to mark the occasion. A gift of the published journals of William John Wills was made to the city by HM Queen Elizabeth II in February 1963. Visitors will see that this was taken from the personal library of Queen Victoria, who, it may be inferred, probably read these journals about the opening up of Australia shortly after they were published in 1863.

Other high status objects for this section include a dinner gong, major works of sculpture and large items of festival decoration. These objects are entirely fitting for high status gifts since they reference major urban gatherings at feasts, commemorative occasions and festivals.



OBJECTS OF VIRTUE

Objects of virtue are fine quality pieces that are almost always produced to be given as special gifts and while not necessarily high status they can denote the seriousness of the occasion or the rank of official between whom the gift is exchanged. These tend to be associated with one-off visits or less formal partnership agreements or delegations and the choice of gift is often associated with the quality craft industries of the donor's city. Good examples of these include a fine metalwork trophy given by a visiting Russian athletic team at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games as do the extraordinary sterling silver bowl and decanter stand from the Corporation of London.



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OBJECTS OF CIVIC EXCHANGE

The business of cities is multiple and varied and many senior officials are involved in partnerships and exchanges between gift-giving cities. The City of Melbourne has accumulated a fabulous collection of these from many cities and nations and, seen en masse, gives a good impression of the international and inter-city business that often carries on unseen and unsung. Displayed here are a large array of Keys to the City from all around the world as well as City Coats of Arms and other insignia of office.



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At the lowest level of gift in the hierarchy, but no less important, are the many hundreds of smaller gifts that are made, often on a personal level by specific people during the course of their engagements with visitors to the city. The purpose of these are less lofty but at all levels the giving of gifts establishes good will, provides an occasion where meeting and greeting can take place, and, critically, provides an ice-breaker from the sometimes awkward formality of choreographed occasions. Some of these are far from self-evidently 'obvious' gifts or souvenirs and so stimulate the gift giver to explain their significance and why they were chosen. All this sets the parties off on a less formal conversation and facilitates the social ease in which later successful transactions can take place. These items are tactile, colourful and intriguing. Explore them for yourselves and see if they make any sense to you!

Prof Adrian Franklin
University of Tasmania and
panellist on ABC TV *Collectors*



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I would like to thank Eddie Butler-Bowdon for inviting me to curate this exhibition; Catherine Hockey for organising the objects (and me) so brilliantly; Mark Drew for key information and stories about the role and process of gift giving for Melbourne City Council and Malcolm McKinnon for the excellent video that accompanies this exhibition.

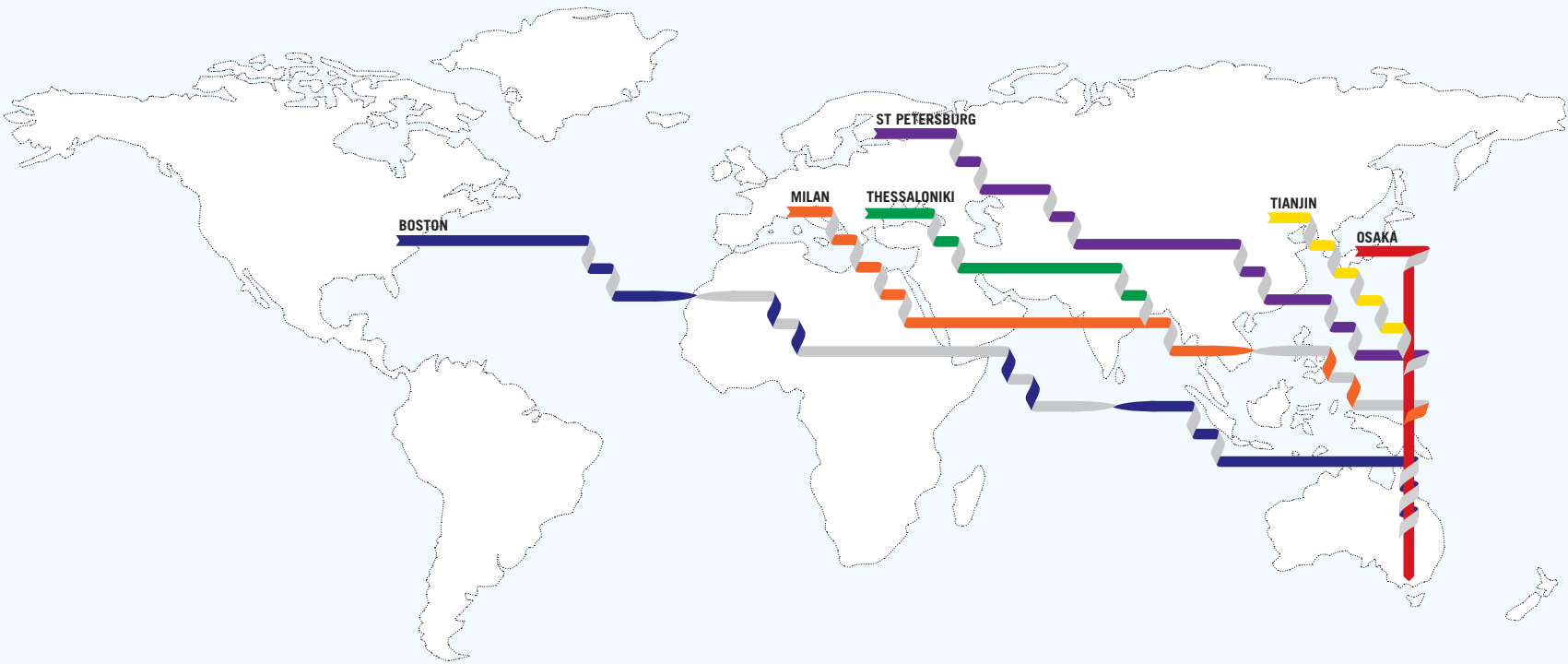
REFERENCES

Marcel Mauss *The Gift* (1966) (originally *Essai sur le don, forme archaïque de l'échange*, 1925) (Trans. Ian Cunnison) London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Thomas, K. (1983) *Man and the Natural World*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.



MELBOURNE'S SISTER CITIES





Gallery hours

Monday 10am–2pm

Tuesday to Friday 11am–6pm

Saturday 10am–4pm

City Gallery

Melbourne Town Hall

Swanston Street

(Enter through Half Tix)