

Freud's Antiquity: Idea, Object, Desire

Professor Daniel Orrells (Department of Classics)
and Freud Museum London





PROJECT SUMMARY

The Freud's Antiquity: Idea, Object, Desire project saw Professor [Daniel Orrells](#) (Department of Classics, King's College London), [Professor Miriam Leonard](#) (University College London), and [Associate Professor Richard Armstrong](#) (University of Houston) collaborate with [Freud Museum London](#). Together, the academics and museum staff curated an exhibition that explored Sigmund Freud's fascination with archaeology.

The project helped the Museum host its inaugural hybrid exhibition, featuring both a physical installation on-site from February to July 2023 and a digital exhibition. The physical exhibition featured well-known objects in Freud's collection as well as artefacts that are rarely or have never been on display to the public. The [digital exhibition](#), a permanent multi-media resource containing podcasts, photographs, and text panels which trace the connections between Freud's most important theoretical breakthroughs and his collection, remains accessible online.

The exhibition sought to broach several pressing intellectual lines of enquiry. For instance, it sought to enhance understandings of how archaeology impacted the evolution of psychoanalysis during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Additionally, it aimed to deepen insights into the various ways Freud's collection of archaeological objects informed his perspectives on gender, sexuality, race, and the historical construction of personal identity.

HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

Interest in the connection between Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories and his fascination with classical antiquity has emerged as a burgeoning area of study among classicists. Relatively recent works, including Daniel Orrells' *Sex: Antiquity and its Legacy* (2015) and Richard Armstrong's *A Compulsion for Antiquity: Freud and the Ancient World* (2006), have argued there are strong links between classical myths, objects, and Freud's broader psychoanalytical theorising.

Daniel, Miriam, and Richard, academics particularly curious about this intersection between Freud and classic antiquity, developed the idea of working with the Freud Museum to curate an exhibition drawing upon this broad body of work. The project would help provide the Museum staff with a deeper understanding of their collection and would also help draw wider attention to a little-known facet of Freud's life. Furthermore, hosting the exhibition would provide a valuable opportunity for the academics and Freud Museum London to further develop relationships with other Freud Museums, such as those in [Vienna](#) and [Pribor](#) (Czechia).

The creation of a digital exhibition ensured that cutting-edge research focused on exploring the connections between Freud and classical objects would be available not just to those visiting the museum in London but also a wider and more global public.

WHAT HAPPENED?

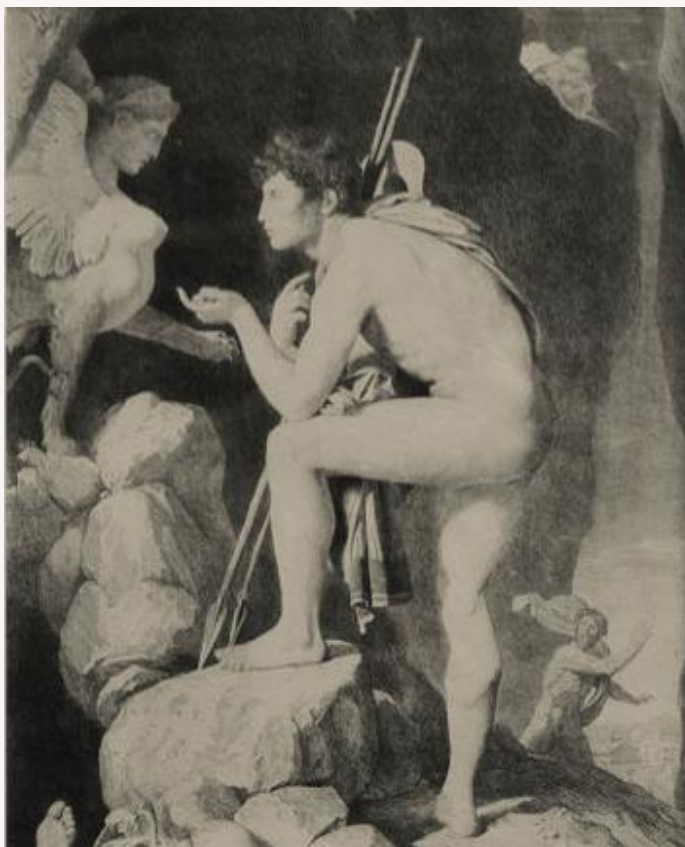
The academics involved and the museum successfully curated a physical and online exhibition. The physical installation featured modern objects which foregrounded Freud's fascination with the classical past. The exhibition showcased Freud's interest in global antiquity, displaying ancient Greek, Etruscan, Roman, and Near Eastern objects. The physical display also incorporated innovative cabinetry in the museum's exhibition room and attractive wall displays.

The exhibition was supplemented by the production of a lavish scholarly exhibition catalogue, illustrated with over 100 photographs.

A programme of public events ran concurrently with the exhibition. These included:

- Greek Tragedy and the Freudian Death Drive (online)
- The Many Lives of the Snake Goddess (in house)
- Drawing at the Freud Museum (in house)
- Queering the Freud Museum (in house)
- Curating Freud's Antiquity conference (online)

The physical display was accompanied by the creation and hosting of the online exhibition. This rich online resource, featuring an array of multimedia, will ensure the long-term accessibility of exhibition content.



Freud's Antiquity: Between Object & Ideal

Richard Armstrong / Miriam Leonard / Daniel Orrells

How do we make sense of the presence of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' portrait of Oedipus and the Sphinx hanging at the foot of Sigmund Freud's couch in his Berggasse consulting room? Freud's association with the Greek myth was secured by his famous formulation of the Oedipus Complex. But why 'Oedipus and the Sphinx' and why this particular representation?

The complex hinges on the significance and resonance of Oedipus' actions of killing his father and sleeping with his mother. Yet this image depicts a different part of Oedipus' story, an episode that takes place between these two fateful events: 'Here we see Oedipus answering the riddle of the Sphinx - using his famed intellect to defeat the feminine monster who has been tormenting the town of Thebes. In answering 'man' to the Sphinx's question 'what goes on four feet in morning, two at midday and three in the evening?', Oedipus links his identity to the human, the human characterised by his command of reason. Ingres' distinctive neoclassical image further links Oedipus to a celebration of rationality. Using a Greek marble sculpture from the Louvre as his model, Ingres depicts Oedipus in the pose of a thinker. His physiognomy

Reproduction print of Oedipus and the Sphinx by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1808

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A page from the exhibition's [catalogue](#) exploring Freud's interest in Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' painting *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1807-1827).



“I found every object somehow in harmony with the place and the history behind it”.

— An anonymous visitor to the *Freud's Antiquity: Idea, Object, Desire* exhibition

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

The academics, the team from the museum, and the wider public attending the exhibition all benefited from the project in various ways.

For the researchers, curating the exhibition was a novel and exciting experience. Daniel Orrells, reflecting on his work on the exhibition, described the experience as an ‘immense opportunity’, noting that it had enriched his understanding of topics aligned with his scholarly research and contributed to his understanding of how the public engages with the past.

The project had significant impacts for the team working in the museum and associated collaborators. It provided the Museum staff with a richer understanding of the objects held within their collection. Furthermore, the exhibition gave heritage professionals at the Museum the opportunity to further develop their curatorial practices.

The exhibition was also very favourably received by the public. According to surveys conducted by the museum, the exhibition obtained an overall rating of 4.53 out of 5. The physical exhibition received positive reviews in a range of media publications, including [The New Yorker](#), [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung](#), and [Etruscan Times](#). One visitor, reflecting on their experiences, offered the following reflection: ‘I found every object somehow in harmony with the place and the history behind it’. Public events held during the exhibition also brought new audiences to the Museum, including those from the LGBTQIA+ public.

Between the period of February 2023 and July 2023, the online exhibition was viewed over 24,000 times.

DANIEL'S TOP 3 TIPS FOR IMPACT

1. Establish a clear sense of your project's intended outcomes and broader impacts right from the start. This clarity will guide you throughout the project and aid in evaluating its progress in the long run.
2. When collaborating with a museum or gallery, it's crucial to develop a solid understanding of the logistics that inform their programming. Doing so empowers researchers and cultural institutions to navigate unwelcome changes in deadlines and timelines smoothly.
3. Think expansively about the criteria you will use to evaluate the success of your project. Measuring certain impacts, such as those upon a museum as an institution, might be reasonably straightforward. On the other hand, gauging impacts upon an exhibition's audience can be tricky. Evaluation tools such as questionnaires or interviews might not always offer the best means to grasp the public's experiences.

FURTHER READING

Richard H. Armstrong, *A Compulsion for Antiquity: Freud and the Ancient World* (New York, 2006).

Miriam Leonard, 'Freud and Tragedy: Oedipus and the Gender of the Universal', *Classical Receptions Journal*, 5:1 (2013), 63-83.

Daniel Orrells, *Classical Culture and Modern Masculinity* (Oxford, 2011).

Daniel Orrells, *Sex: Antiquity and its Legacy* (London, 2015).

Elizabeth Winkler, 'Freud, the Antique Collector', *The New Yorker*, June 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/freud-the-antique-collector>



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