On Display:  
Dr Christopher Marshall  
Senior Lecturer, University of Melbourne

How did you make the segue from your PHD focus on Neapolitan Baroque art to lecturing about issues facing contemporary museums?  
My PhD studied the issue of how Baroque artists worked not so much in isolation but as part of a broader art world. So I researched topics like dealers and the art market, collecting and display which led, in turn, to my considering the roles of collections and museums and the whole area of the public reception of art more generally.

In truth, though, I’ve always been obsessed with museums. After my PhD, I was lucky enough to get a lecturing position at Melbourne University that has enabled me to work in both ‘traditional’ art history (whatever that means these days, and it is increasingly broad) as well as in museum studies and curatorship. I find it a fantastic and constantly stimulating mix of disciplines. And of course the other really rewarding aspect of my job is teaching. Besides research and the input of colleagues, I have to say that it is really the students who help to keep me fresh and energised in what I’m doing. I gain an enormous amount from listening to their responses because they bring all kinds of new perspectives to whatever issue we might be discussing.

Has having a parallel life as a musician shaped the way that you appreciate art?  
I guess I would consider myself more of a singer than a fully-fledged musician—but it’s true that I have spent a lot of time in the company of musicians. From them I have gained a great respect for the struggle—as well as the rewards—involved in trying to play music in any serious kind of way. It’s also reinforced for me the basic lesson that one should never seek to limit oneself by imposing artificial categories or restrictions on artistic expression. There is absolutely no difference in degree of significance, as far as I’m concerned, between the interplay of drums and vocals in Iggy Pop’s Lust for Life, for example, and the combination of deep shadows and rich scarlet in Caravaggio’s Death of the Virgin. They are both brilliantly dramatic creations that have had an equally profound impact on the kind of person I am today.

What projects are you currently working on?  
I have just started a new project on sculpture and museums. Its initial focus will be an international conference on the topic that I am helping to convene that is scheduled for early next year at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. We plan to eventually publish it as a book. I have to say that it is really the students who help to keep me fresh and energised in what I’m doing. I gain an enormous amount from listening to their responses because they bring all kinds of new perspectives to whatever issue we might be discussing.

Do you have a favourite object or collection in a Victorian museum/gallery?  
They don’t show them much for obvious conservation reasons, but Blake’s illustrations to Dante’s Divine Comedy are one of the absolute gems of the NGV. I remember seeing them as a child and being absolutely transfixed by the intensity of their dream-like imagery. But I’ve also been equally inspired over the years by objects in non-art museums. The pythons in the old Museum of Victoria were an early viewing highlight—as I imagine they must still be for children today—I love the way they hang there with their skeletons coiled alongside! The spectacle of dead things brought seemingly back to life is still one of the most powerful charges available to museums. For the past couple of years I have been teaching a seminar on the recent controversy surrounding the decision of a museum in Salta, Argentina, to display three extraordinarily well preserved corpses of children aged between six and fifteen who, it seems, were ritually sacrificed about 500 years ago. I still haven’t quite made my mind up about whether they were wrong to display them, which is partly a reflection of the wide range of opinions that I tend to get back from the students when we talk about it. And that’s precisely what I love about museum studies. Nothing is ever set in concrete. There is always scope to discuss and debate the ideas further.

➢ Dr Christopher R. Marshall is a Senior Lecturer in Art History and Museum Studies in the School of Art History, Cinema, Classics and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne.  
Photo: Dr Marshall is accompanied by Caravaggio’s Medusa. Photo by Ian Kendrick.
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Author/s:
MARSHALL, CHRISTOPHER

Title:
On display: Dr Christopher Marshall

Date:
2006

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34782

File Description:
On display: Dr. Christopher Marshall

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