

# CITY GIFTS



CURATED BY PROF ADRIAN FRANKLIN

No city stands alone and they never have. Whether we think of ancient Rome, Venice during the Renaissance, or modern New York, it is clear that successful cities are built on the connections they make with the outside world, especially other cities.

By establishing trade links, exchanging information and resources and providing mutual support, new networks of cities have built robust and sustainable economies upon which vibrant city cultures and civilisations have thrived.

Cities must be governed in such a way that these vital threads of cooperation are fostered and in this sense they must create the conditions in which new potential partners can feel comfortable and welcome. Apart from inviting new visitors, the City of Melbourne must also renew good will and explore further mutual interests with older allies and partners

Global cities must develop the ability to host, entertain and facilitate friendships. It is of course a delicate and complex art but every successful partnership begins with the giving of a gift and it is sealed by the return gift. When two cities enter into gift exchange they are on the way to becoming partners with everything to gain.

The giving of gifts between cities may seem like a purely symbolic gesture, part of the pomp and ceremony, and a required element of formal protocol. But this is very far from being the case.

In 1925 the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss argued that gift exchange was a universally practiced mode of social reproduction which lay at the very heart of all known societies. The gift was so important that Mauss referred to it as 'total social phenomenon' because it was functional for the maintenance of the entire social fabric including religious, legal, political, moral and economic life. While in advanced Western economies many of these functions had been taken over by other institutions, Mauss saw that the gift still had a central role since while having the appearance of being voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous it was in practice obligatory and interested. In short, gift giving is a way of creating obligations and establishing economic interests between the parties. That gift giving is not entirely innocent is given in ancient Germanic languages where the word for gift means both gift and poison (gift is still the modern German word for poison); in the North American system of competitive gift giving known as potlatch, to out-give someone is to create permanent obligation and a superior political status. All over the world gift exchanges create a sense of obligation between the giver and the receiver as well as an honour-bound duty to abide by those obligations.

In the modern world political competition is worked out on different lines but the gift, especially gift exchange between governments and major cities is still significant precisely because it creates an on-going series of exchanges and the visits required to make them and it is during these, when two or more parties are drawn together for protracted periods of a visit, that opportunities for other exchanges and the creation of more formal economic exchanges can be made.

While both parties will have multiple interests behind wanting to create these exchange partnerships, the formal gift is only part of the things that are actually exchanged and the benefits of the venture may not be entirely apparent in advance.

In sum, gifts between cities set in train further exchanges of people and things and this exhibition aims not only to illustrate the range and depth of gifts exchanges with other cities by showcasing a selection of gifts given to Melbourne, but also to demonstrate the tangible benefits that arise from them. Officials and politicians may change, and the immediate focus may be forever be shifting to the next visit and delegation, but the material presence of the gift and opportunities to display them provide an important memory for any city wishing to know its journey through time and learn from its own past.



1.



2.

1. Vase, presented by France for the 1880 Melbourne Exhibition  
Sevres Porcelain  
Manufacture, 1879-1880  
porcelain, 69 x 38cm

2. Medal, Armenia, 1988  
Maker unknown, 1980s  
metal, 6.4cm diameter

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.



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 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.

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.

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.

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.



3.

3. Tray, presented to commemorate the arrival of the first Rolls Royce powered Boeing 747 in 1978  
Sterling Silverware Ltd, Sheffield, 1976  
silver, 18cm diameter



4.

4. The White Tower, leading monument of sister city, Thessaloniki, presented in 2009  
wood, paint, metal, 126 x 52cm



5.

5. La Lupa del Campidoglio, Gift of Prince Boncampagni, Governor of Rome, 1934  
Maker unknown, 1934  
bronze, marble, 50.5 x 66 x 31cm

## 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.



6.



7.

**6. Vase, Japanese satsuma ware (satsuma yaki), 1910-20**  
Maker unknown  
ceramic, 40 x 18.5cm

**7. Sterling Silver and Gilt Charger, gift from the Corporation of London, August 1970**  
fully hallmarked, 1963  
silver, gilt, 40cm diameter

## 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.



11.



12.

**11. Key, City of Bangkok**  
Maker unknown  
metal, ribbon, 12.5 x 4cm

**12. Key, City of Bangkok**  
Maker unknown  
metal, ribbon, 12.5 x 4cm



8.



9.



10.

**8. Key, City of Osaka, presented to the Right Hon. Ron Walker in 1976**  
Maker unknown  
metal

**9. Matryoshka doll / Babushka doll, gift from sister city, St Petersburg**  
Maker unknown, 1990s  
wood, paint  
15 x 7.5cm

**10. Jug**  
Beswick, England,  
mid 20th Century  
ceramic, 23 x 9.5cm

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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13.

13. **Ocarina**  
Arrigo Mignani,  
late 20th Century  
clay, 23 x 9 x 4.5cm



14.

14. **Figurine**  
Maker unknown  
ceramic, 20 x 8cm

I would like to thank Eddie Butler-Bowdon from the Arts and Culture Branch for inviting me to curate this exhibition; Catherine Hockey for organising the objects (and me) so brilliantly; Julia Johnston for her attention to detail; Jane Sharwood from Business and International for her knowledge and generous support; 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. Thanks also to Round who quickly grasped the concept of the exhibition and responded with great design.

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.



15.

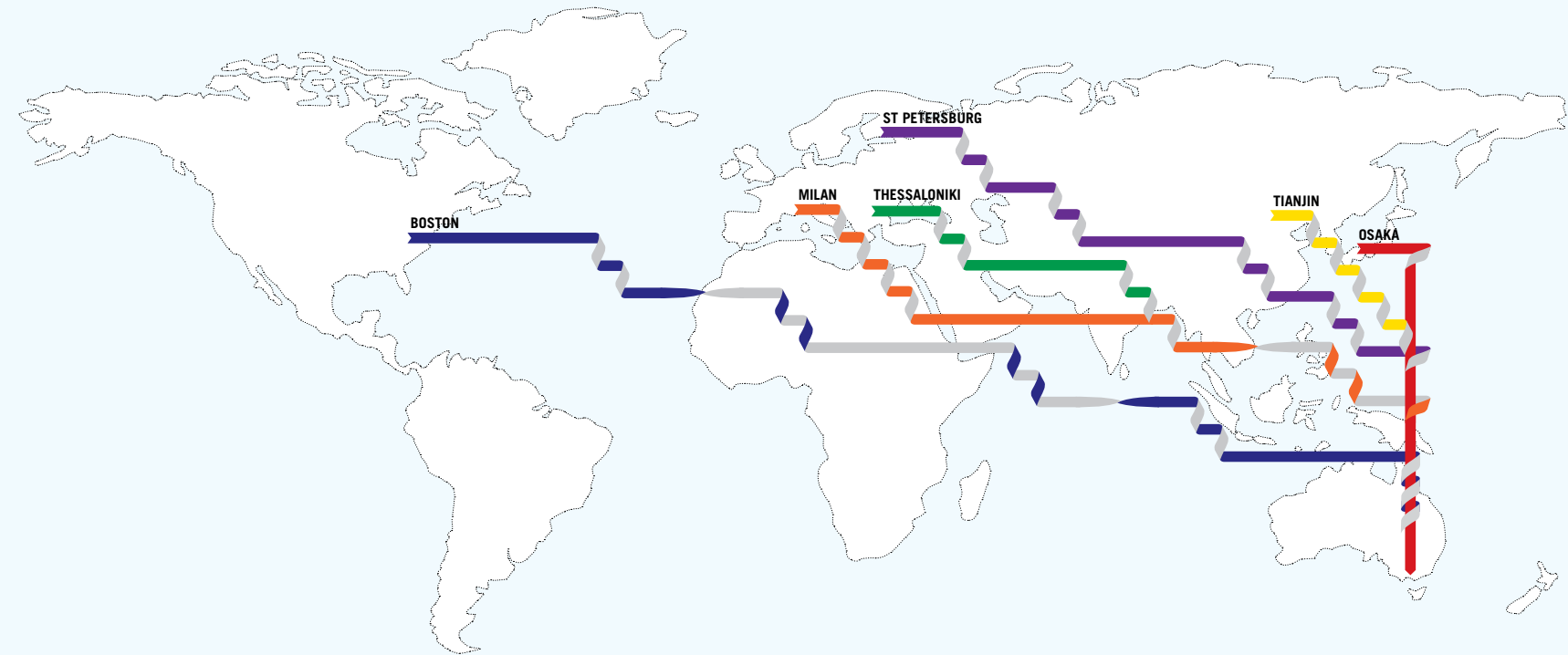
15. **Alexander the Great, Gift from sister city, Thessaloniki**  
Maker unknown,  
late 20th Century  
metal, 11.5 x 8.5cm

16. **Japanese knife, presented on the occasion of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games**  
Maker unknown  
wood, metal, string, 52 x 4.5cm



16.

# 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)