

meet the curators

Donald White

CHIEF CURATOR,
MEDITERRANEAN
SECTION

BY DEBORAH I.
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Some of you know a thing or two about our featured museum curator, Donald White, because of his role in the exhibition, “Worlds Intertwined: Etruscans, Greeks and Romans.” This ambitious project occupied much of his time since 1990, intensifying from 1999 leading up to the opening of the new Etruscan and Roman galleries at the UPM this past March. But what led to this museum curator’s passion for and career in classical archaeology?

Donald’s first brush with the Classical world came when visiting his brother’s school as a small child. There he encountered statues of gods and goddesses posed in a variety of engaging stages of undress. While this chance meeting didn’t create an instant classical scholar, Donald’s schooling that included ancient history, Latin, and Greek advanced his appreciation of antiquity, leading to majoring in classics at Harvard. Judging him probably unsuited to do much else (according to Donald), his professors encouraged him to apply to graduate school in classical archaeology.

After six months of Army active duty, Donald entered Princeton’s classical archaeology graduate program. His “transforming experience” came when he joined Princeton’s excavations at Morgantina. This six-month sojourn exposed him to Sicily’s rich culture and archaeology. Three excavation seasons later, armed with a Ph.D. thesis on the introduction and spread of Demeter’s cult in Sicily, Donald accepted a teaching job at the University of Michigan.

In archaeology’s typical turn-about fashion, Michigan sent him off to do fieldwork and research in an entirely different part of the Classical world, the coastal region of eastern Libya (Cyrenaica). He started excavations at the port city of ancient

This Hellenistic marble head of Persephone is one of the many objects found at Demeter’s sanctuary in Cyrene.



Apollonia in 1964, but later excavations overlapped with the outbreak of the 1967 Six-Day War, leading to a forced evacuation. Donald returned in 1969 to begin excavation of the Demeter and Persephone Extramural Sanctuary at nearby Cyrene. In a series of seasons lasting until 1981 (until 1971 for the University of Michigan and for the UPM thereafter), Donald and his international team excavated the complete middle and a section of the upper grounds of this important hillside site (ca. 630 B.C. to A.D. 262). By 1981, the clock ran out on archaeological research in Libya, and Donald was reluctantly forced to leave. He and his colleagues have published seven volumes on their work, two by Donald.

In 1984, he turned to the northwest coast of Egypt. There, on a tiny islet in a salt-water lagoon near the Egyptian city of Marsa Matruh (ancient Greek Paraitonion), Donald conducted three excavation seasons. Work concentrated on the Late Bronze Age settlement, which proved to mark the westernmost distribution point known to that time of Minoan, Mycenaean, and Cypriot Late Bronze pottery along the southern Mediterranean coastline. Two volumes on the UPM’s work at Marsa Matruh were published this year.

After a long and distinguished career, including chief curator of the Mediterranean Section since 1990, Donald will retire in January 2004. He plans to move back to his family’s farm in Cohasset, Massachusetts, to complete the final monograph for the 11-volume series on Cyrene. Donald sums up his career as a “bumpy but consistent road” that took him to a “uniquely interesting but never boring” part of the world. 🏠

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Donald White at Marsa Matruh during the 1985 dig season.

MARBLE HEAD: UPM; PORTRAIT: MARSA MATRUH EXPEDITION