

## History of the Department of Physics at UWA

### Issue No. 14: “Apoxyomenos: The Physics Department’s Greek Statue”

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Because of the large seating capacity of the Upper and Lower Lecture Theatres in the Physics building, many departments across the university campus present their first-year classes in these theatres. Thus many hundreds of students are familiar with the bronze statue that adorns the entrance foyer leading to them. Less know that this statue has the title Apoxyomenos and even fewer know that it is a reproduction in bronze of a famous statue created by the great Greek sculptor Lysippus who lived in the IV Century BC. This is the story of how and why we have this impressive work of art.\*



View of Physics Entrance Foyer (Atrium) 1962 #

The Principal Architect (W.L. Green of the Government’s Department of Public Works) has reported that in the early stages of planning the new Physics Building there were discussions on the desirability of obtaining a feature for the centre of the impressive Entrance Foyer (now commonly called the Atrium) of the building. It was envisaged that the feature would suggest “Science” or more particularly “Physics” and if possible be of a contemporary theme. With a view to purchasing or commissioning a sculpture by a famous Italian artist, an approach was made to the Italian Embassy in Canberra.

In reply, the Italian Ambassador, E. Prato, stated, “the competent Italian authorities, to whom this Embassy addressed such request, have advised that amongst the various possibilities of obtaining a statue, the reproduction of an already existing statue should be excluded, because it is feared a replica would only offer a conventional or academic work. The Italian authorities would suggest instead to commission the work to a qualified and well-known Italian artist so that an original and worthy work of art can be obtained.” He then went on to say, “the said authorities are pleased to offer such a statue as a gift to the University of Western Australia.”

It was immediately agreed that the offer of such a generous gift would have to be accepted. However, it was also acknowledged that accepting the statue as a gift would reduce our Department's options in choosing the style and theme of the statue.

It was already September 1961 when this offer was made and the university inquired whether the statue might be available by the time of the official opening of the new Physics Building in April 1962. The Italian authorities regretted that this deadline could not be met and it was agreed that the unveiling of the statue would be a separate event. Although the fact is not recorded, it is possible that this short time-line may have influenced the decision not to commission an entirely new work.



**Apoxyomenos, 2009 ##**



**Apoxyomenos, 2009 ##**

The gift that was initially offered by “the Italian authorities” was, in fact, a gift offered directly by the University of Rome, as evidenced by a letter from the Chancellor of that University, Giuseppe Ugo Papi, to our Chancellor, Sir Alex Reid, on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1962. The letter reads, in part (see Attachment 1, for full text), after referring to the opening of our new Physics building, as follows:

“In such a happy circumstance, and in memory of the important event, the University of Rome wishes to offer to the said University a gift of great significance: the reproduction in bronze of the famous statue “Apoxyomenos”, due to the genius of the great Greek sculptor Lysippus, who lived in the IV century B.C.

“The sending of the prized work of art, which is a copy of the model in the Vatican Museum and which is the subject of constant admiration from visitors from all parts of the world, is intended to be an act of cordial friendship between our Universities and an auspicious sign that the spiritual ties existing between our Countries may become even more intensive.”

The original illuminated copy of this letter was framed and attached to one of the columns at the entrance to the foyer. It remained there for nearly 50 years but unfortunately, over these years the bright sunlight in the foyer caused the words and letters in red to fade, thus making the document very difficult to read. Late in 2009 it was removed for restoration.

The Latin word ‘apoxyomenos’ describes the action depicted in the statue which shows an athlete, cleansing himself in a traditional manner. Having first bathed, he has then applied oil to his body and is scraping this off with an implement called a strigil.

The unveiling date of 1<sup>st</sup> June 1962 was chosen to coincide with the eve of the celebration of the sixteenth anniversary of the Italian Republic.

An engraved brass plaque was attached to the statue’s pedestal. It reads:

**‘APOXYOMENOS’  
BY LYSIPPUS (IV CENTURY BC)  
PRESENTED ON BEHALF OF  
THE UNIVERSITY OF ROME BY  
DR. I ARGENTO, CONSUL FOR ITALY  
AND UNVEILED ON 1<sup>ST</sup> JUNE 1962**

And so it was that on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1962, our grand statue Apoxyomenos, a generous gift from the University of Rome, was unveiled in the Atrium, in the presence of our Chancellor and other members of the top echelon of our University officials, a representative of the Government of Western Australia, the Italian Consul in Perth, the Academic Staff of the Physics Department, and select visitors including a list provided by the Italian Consulate.

Before unveiling the statue, the Consul for Italy, Dr. I. Argento, read a letter of greetings from the Chancellor of the University of Rome, as reproduced in part above and in full in Attachment 1. Whereupon, the Chancellor of our university, Sir Alex Reid, accepted the statue with thanks and called upon the University’s Public Orator, Professor M. N. Austin (Professor of Classics and Ancient History) to express our appreciation by reading greetings to the University of Rome. For those readers who appreciate seeing the English language used in its most elegant form with true verbal pomp and ceremony, I recommend that you read Austin’s oration in full in Attachment 2. In part he says:

“To the Chancellor, Professors, Masters and Students of the University of Rome, we, the members of the University of Western Australia, send greetings and this inadequate expression of our sincere gratitude for a gift at once so magnificent in itself and so signal a token of a generous spirit of academic fellowship. We are deeply moved that so famed an institution, rooted in the sacred soil of the eternal city, endowed with the glories of an immemorial tradition, yet sensitive and alert to the intellectual currents and imperious demands of the modern world, should look with benignant eyes upon our work, in this our youthful university so far away.

“Although the particular occasion is the auspicious ceremony of opening the new building for the Department of Physics, the gift itself of the famous statue, a work of Greek art, saved and guarded for posterity by Rome, shows how well you appreciate the unity and continuity of the great intellectual and humane tradition which we share both to preserve and to advance.”

The greetings, as prepared and read by Professor Austin, were also translated into Latin and sent to the Italian Consul. In addition, it was arranged that copies, in both Latin and English, were delivered personally to the University of Rome by Dr S.E. Williams who was due to travel to Italy soon after this event.

The greatness of the ancient sculptor Lysippus, the renown of his work over the centuries and the special features that make the statue Apoxyomenos so important can be judged from the following report.

“Lysippus, who lived during the second half of the fourth century B.C., was the most successful sculptor of his time. It is said that Alexander the Great would let no one else portray him in bronze, the artist’s favourite medium, and there are records of a great number of statues made by him, representing an extremely large variety of subjects, commissioned by individuals or states all over the Greek world.

“Not a single one of these works (traditionally fifteen hundred in number) has survived; but several copies can be identified with reasonable certainty, and one of the best known of these is the marble statue of a youth scraping himself (“apoxyomenos”), which is now in the Vatican Museum. From this can be seen the distinctive features of his work; the scheme of proportions is slightly different from that which had been accepted for more than a century, with a head slightly smaller in relation to the body, which is slimmer and tauter than the squarely-built figures of earlier artists; and the attitude in which the athlete is represented, using a strigil to scrape the skin after having bathed and oiled himself, is chosen to make the most of the three-dimensional effect given by the outstretched arms and slight torsion of the body.

“The statue was set up in Rome at the end of the first century B.C. by Agrippa, the counselor of Augustus, in front of the public baths which he built.

“The replica which has been presented to the University of Western Australia by the University of Rome is in bronze, and therefore, although some of the fineness of execution of minor details may have disappeared in the copying, it has much of the quality which the original work possessed.”

Perhaps, if we had received a sculpture that depicted some artist’s idea of contemporary Physics in the 1960’s it might already be showing its age. As it is, we have a work of art with over two thousand years of history already behind it and whilst we continue to treasure and enjoy it we are, as the Public Orator suggested, playing our part in the intellectual tradition of preservation and advancement, mirroring our actions in the field of scientific endeavour.

Epilogue:

As mentioned above, apoxyomenos is the Latin word used to describe cleansing by the scraping of the skin, which is the action depicted in this statue. However, it has become a local custom to use the title Apoxyomenos as the name of our Greek athlete, thus humanising him and making it easier to include him as part of our Physics community. As one might expect, he has always received great attention from our students – in a variety of ways.

The statue did come with a removable “fig leaf”, as evidenced by the threaded hole that can be seen on close inspection. However, this addition was never mounted as it was assumed that it would be quickly appropriated by some pranksters or perhaps even by the “engineering students”, as there was a strong and lively rivalry between science, engineering and law students in those days.

Although the nakedness of our statue is taken for granted for most of the year, there are times when he is dressed-up in clothing appropriate to the occasion. For example, at Christmas, and especially during the Physics Christmas Party that was traditionally held in the Physics Atrium, he would always be found sporting a red loin cloth and the traditional red Christmas hat complete with white trim and pompom on the top.

There was one serious incident which followed a party, perhaps at the end of exams, when a group of students were wrapping poor old Apoxy up in toilet paper. However, in the



**Apoxy, after the accident. c 1980 ###**

process he was pulled off his stand and in falling to the floor his right hand was broken off (see picture). In fact this bronze statue is hollow and not as solid or stable as it appears - a fact not taken into account by the students. The next morning, the principal student concerned, full of contrition, duly reported the misdemeanor to the Head of the Department. Fortunately, however, the Head, recognizing that student pranks in those days were usually based on light-hearted irreverence without any destructive intent, dismissed the event, much to the relief of the

student who had expected to be “sent down”. The statue was repaired by a professional restorer and its mounting onto the pedestal was strengthened.

In Australia in the 1960’s, nakedness, particularly of the male body, still caused an element of shock and some embarrassment to viewers, even when in the form of a statue. Thus many people tried hard to ignore this statue whilst passing through the Atrium. However, it is quite possible that many young female students, coming fresh and innocent from high school, may have received their first lesson in the human anatomy of a male Homo sapiens in the entrance foyer of the UWA Physics Department.

#### Connections:

For many years there was little or no contact between our Physics Department and the University of Rome. This was to change, however, when in 1975 a research project was initiated to build a Gravity Wave Detector within the Department. In this research it is essential to coordinate the detection of the gravity waves coming from deep-space at three or more sites spread around the world, in order to determine, by triangulation, the direction from which the wave arrives. At that time the only other detector being built outside the USA was

one being constructed by the University of Rome, which has led to an ensuing close scientific collaboration between our two universities.

\* Material for this article has been obtained from the University's Archive file UWAA 2233.

# UWA Archive Photo 4526P. ## Photo credit: J.L.Robins. ### Photo credit: Unknown.

### **Attachment 1.**

The following is a copy of a letter from the Chancellor, Giuseppe Ugo Papi, of the University of Rome to the Chancellor, Sir Alex Reid, of the University of Western Australia. This letter was read out by the Italian Consul in Western Australia, Dr I. Argento, on the 1<sup>st</sup> June 1962, at the unveiling of the statue "Apoxyomenos" which was a gift from the University of Rome to the Physics Department of the University of Western Australia.

The original illuminated copy of this letter was framed and mounted on a pillar in the Entrance Foyer of the Department of Physics, adjacent to the statue, but has recently (2009) been removed for restoration.

The **University of Rome** is delighted to offer its warm augural greeting to the **University of Perth** on the occasion of the opening of the new premises of the **Faculty of Physics** and, at the same time, to express its most ardent wish that its teachings, which have already rendered it illustrious and celebrated, although still young in existence, may increase more for the progress of science and for the good of humanity.

In such a happy circumstance, and in memory of the important event, the **University of Rome** wishes to offer to the said **University** a gift of great significance: the reproduction in bronze of the famous statue Apoxyomenos due to the genius of the great Greek sculptor Lysippus who lived in the IV Century B.C.

In sending this prized work of art, which is a copy of the model in the **Vatican Museum** and which is the subject of constant admiration from visitors from all parts of the world, is intended to be an act of cordial friendship between our **Universities** and an auspicious sign that the spiritual ties existing between our **Countries** may become even more intensive.

In remembering the noble and tenacious work undertaken in **Australia**, especially in these last years, in the technical and industrial field, by numbers of our countrymen, and the generous spirit of appreciation and brotherly understanding shown, with heartfelt spirit, towards them by the **Australian people**, the **University of Rome** expresses its warmest augural wishes for the scientific work of the **Faculty of Physics** of the **University of Perth** for the entire **Academic Staff**, for its illustrious **Chancellor** and for the students who, with intelligence and fervour, carry out their studies there under the guidance of its illustrious and celebrated **Masters**.

Rome, 21 March 1962

**The Chancellor**  
(Sgd.) **Giuseppe Ugo Lapi**

**Attachment 2.**

The following is a copy of the letter read out by the University's Public Orator, Professor M. N. Austin, as an expression of our University's appreciation and gratitude to the University of Rome for their generous gift to us of the statue "Apoxyomenos".

To the Chancellor, Professors, Masters and Students of the University of Rome, we, the members of the University of Western Australia, send greetings and this inadequate expression of our sincere gratitude for a gift at once so magnificent in itself and so signal a token of a generous spirit of academic fellowship. We are deeply moved that so famed an institution, rooted in the sacred soil of the eternal city, endowed with the glories of an immemorial tradition, yet sensitive and alert to the intellectual currents and imperious demands of the modern world, should look with benignant eyes upon our work, in this our youthful university so far away.

Although the particular occasion is the auspicious ceremony of opening the new building for the Department of Physics, the gift itself of the famous statue, a work of Greek art, saved and guarded for posterity by Rome, shows how well you appreciate the unity and continuity of the great intellectual and humane tradition which we share both to preserve and to advance.

We rejoice that we have as fellow-workers and fellow-citizens many of your own fellow-countrymen; and we are honoured to receive your gift and augural greetings by the hands and in the person of your national representative, the Consul, Dr. Argento.

All members of the University in the Faculties of the Humanities and the Sciences, in particular those of the Department of Physics, will, as they contemplate and admire this statue, remember your goodwill, and be ever zealous in word and deed to be worthy of your generous appreciation and expectation of their work for the progress of science and the good of humanity.

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