

RECONSTRUCTING THE 1936 BRITISH SCHOOL AT ATHENS (BSA) EXHIBITION:

A WORKSHOP ON THE STUDY OF PRE-WORLD WAR II
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXHIBITIONS USING ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

Organisers: Andrew Shapland, Renée Trepagnier, Amalia Kakissis, and Charlotte Townsend



WEDNESDAY 28TH MAY 2025

10:00–17:00

**HEADLEY LECTURE THEATRE,
ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM
BEAUMONT STREET**

**OX1 2PH
AND ONLINE**

A **ASHMOLEAN
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Above Image: Detail of 1936 Exhibition London Underground poster by Piet de Jong, reproduced with permission of the British School at Athens.

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Workshop Abstract

With the growth of the museum studies discipline and the interest in archival and archaeological collections in museums and heritage organisations, the history and reception of museums and pre-World War II archaeological displays and exhibitions has become a popular topic of study. Such research has situated the exhibitions of archaeological sites around the Mediterranean within the socio-political context of their creation and analysed the wider public reaction to such exhibitions. Archival sources and archaeological museum collections aid in reconstructing such exhibitions and learning about the historical approaches to curation and exhibition presentation.

This workshop comes out of a collaborative project between the Ashmolean Museum and the British School at Athens (BSA) to digitally reconstruct the BSA's 50th Anniversary exhibition *British Archaeological Discoveries in Greece and Crete 1886 to 1936* at Burlington House in London. This exhibition highlighted the BSA as a preeminent archaeological research centre by displaying objects, drawings, photographs, and architectural plans from the excavations at Knossos, Sparta, Cyprus, Melos, Perachora, and Mycenae. The Ashmolean Museum holds the exhibition materials from Sir Arthur Evans's 'Minoan Room' as well as many of the objects which were lent to the show, while the BSA holds the remainder of the material displayed in the BSA Excavations, Byzantine, and Perachora Excavation rooms, as well as photographs of the exhibition. The output of this project is a digital publication which catalogues and analyses the recently digitised exhibition collections at both the Ashmolean Museum and the BSA Archive. The first part of the workshop will introduce the digital publication and the history of the 1936 Exhibition. In the second part of the workshop, scholars with interests in pre-WW II archaeological exhibitions and the history of the two institutions will present their work on the topic.

Session 1: The BSA's 1936 Exhibition

10:00-10:20: Andrew Shapland (*Ashmolean Museum*)

Exhibiting Knossos (1902-present)

10:30-10:50: Amalia Kakissis (*British School at Athens*)

Showcasing 50 years of accomplishments: The British School at Athens and the 1936 Exhibition at Burlington House, London

11:00-11:20: Renée Trepagnier (*Ashmolean Museum and University of Bristol*)

Reconstructing the Minoan Room

11:30-11:50: Charlotte Townsend (*British School at Athens and University of Liverpool*)

The Archival History of the BSA's 1936 Exhibits

Lunch Break: 12:30-13:30

Session 2: Artefact Collecting and Exhibition Culture Before 1936

13:30-13:50: Abigail Baker (*Fitzwilliam Museum*)

Inevitable comparisons? Schliemann's Troy exhibition and London exhibition culture

14:00-14:20: Yannis Galanakis (*University of Cambridge*)

'Before the exhibition': tensions & contradictions in the exportation of antiquities on the eve of the Knossos excavations

14:30-14:50: Vassiliki Pliatsika and Konstantinos Paschalidis (*Hellenic National Archaeological Museum*) (*online*)

An original idea. Gillieron's "Exposition de fac-similés et de reproductions de l'art Créto-Minoen" in the National Archaeological Museum

Tea Break: 15:00-15:30

Session 3: Interrogations and Receptions of the 1936 Exhibition

15:30-15:50: Mnemosyne Rice (*Trinity College Dublin*)

"Serious, important, overcrowded": The replicas in the Minoan Room at Burlington House

16:00-16:20: Nicoletta Momigliano (*University of Bristol*)

Public perceptions of the Minoans in 1936

16:30-17:00: Closing Remarks

Andrew Shapland

Exhibiting Knossos (1902-present)

The 1936 exhibition was not the first to feature material from Knossos, and nor was it the last. This paper will trace the history of exhibitions involving Knossos, starting with two small displays Sir Arthur Evans curated in 1902 and 1903. The second of these, at the Royal Academy, appears to have been a direct forerunner of the 1936 Minoan Room although it only presented drawings, photographs and replicas of his finds from the site. Since 1936 there have been a number of exhibitions and displays about Knossos including the Ashmolean's 2023 *Labyrinth* exhibition. These help to contextualise the 1936 exhibition by showing how curatorial choices have changed over time as well as some significant continuities.

Amalia Kakissis

Showcasing 50 years of accomplishments: The British School at Athens and the 1936 Exhibition at Burlington House, London

This paper will discuss the main historical milestones of the British School at Athens leading up to its Golden Jubilee in 1936 and the key figures and events that influenced the curation of the 1936 Exhibition. How did the founding members of the School, their tightknit networks and world events impact the development of the School in these first 50 years? How did the School's agenda change in the transition of power from the founding members of the School to the new generation of scholars? Who was the Jubilee committee composed of and who were the curators for the BSA's part of the 1936 exhibition? What was the vision of the Jubilee committee, what challenges did they face with the unexpected deaths of two BSA Directors in the year before the exhibition opened and how did that impact what finally went on show in London?

Renée Trepagnier

Reconstructing the Minoan Room

Sir Arthur Evans, excavator of Knossos, played a pivotal role in the British School at Athens's (BSA) 1936 Exhibition with his construction and display of the Minoan Room. The Minoan Room exhibited over four hundred objects, labels, and replicas from the Ashmolean Museum and Evans's private collection. Through the recent digitisation efforts of the Sir Arthur Evans Archive at the Ashmolean Museum, it is now possible to examine the exhibition labels alongside the objects of the collection and the BSA's Archive. In this paper, I discuss the archival successes and challenges of reconstructing the Minoan Room. I suggest that the Minoan Room, through its use of annotated proofs and illustration paste-ups as exhibition labels, acted as a condensed, three-dimensional version of Evans's four-volume publication of the Minoan civilisation, *The Palace of Minos*.

The Archival History of the BSA's 1936 Exhibits

Hundreds of photographs, illustrations, casts, and models were gathered at Burlington House in the autumn of 1936. But what happened to them in the aftermath of the exhibition? Knowing the archival history of a set of documents allows present and future users of a collection to have a better understanding of what is available to them and why. Focusing largely on the wall displays currently stored in the archive at the British School at Athens, this presentation will look at the various movements and uses of the exhibits in the years since the exhibition, culminating in the creation of an archival catalogue compliant with international archival standards.

Abigail Baker

Inevitable comparisons? Schliemann's Troy exhibition and London exhibition culture

More than half a century before the *British Archaeological Discoveries in Greece and Crete* exhibition, another blockbuster exhibition had captured the public imagination. This paper explores the long shadow of the first exhibition, Schliemann's Trojan collection at South Kensington Museum, and considers it as a case study that can shed light on expectations of archaeological display and desires about archaeological discoveries. The Trojan exhibition took place at a time when readings of early archaeological material were hotly contested and its controversial nature drew public attention and created enduring narratives about sensational discoveries and possible reality of myth that proved hard to shake. Evans had experienced (and to some extent courted) comparisons with Schliemann throughout his work at Knossos and the centrality of Evans' discoveries to the 1936 exhibition meant that many themes re-emerge. This paper looks at practical similarities in display and interpretation between the two exhibitions, issues of institutional context and the kinds of support they aimed to attain. It also asks how much had changed in terms of understanding of the ancient world and ways to engage with it. By looking back at previous exhibitions we can also get a sense of where the 1936 exhibition innovated and how these new approaches would shape museum experiences in the years to come.

Yannis Galanakis

'Before the exhibition': tensions & contradictions in the exportation of antiquities on the eve of the Knossos excavations

This paper tries to address a seemingly simple question: why were the early Knossos excavations not under the auspices of the British School at Athens? An answer to this question, partly at least as this paper argues, lies in the exportation of antiquities; an exportation with which the School did not want to be associated. To contextualise this case, this paper will examine the purchase of objects by Evans in Greece in the late 1890s, his thoughts (and those of others) on the antiquities laws of Greece and of Crete (with changes happening on that front on either end of 1900), and the

procurement of antiquities through the agency of Duncan Mackenzie. It also takes into consideration the Greek perspective (from the likes of P. Kavvadias and I. Hazzidakis). In doing so, it tries to tell the story behind the objects, many of which eventually made it to the 1936 exhibition. This paper aims at presenting the tensions and contradictions on the eve of the Knossos excavations, specifically with regards to the control over antiquities, as well as the changing ethics in what it meant to be an ‘archaeologist’ around that time.

Vassiliki Pliatsika and Konstantinos Paschalidis

An original idea. Gillieron's “Exposition de fac-similés et de reproductions de l’art Créto-Minoen” in the National Archaeological Museum.

On Thursday, October 11, 1934, Gilliéron *fils* organised the first ever temporary exhibition of the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Expanding in two museum halls, the exhibition comprised eighty-nine replicas and reproductions of well-known masterpieces of “Creto-Minoan art” with a few Mycenaean additions. All exhibits were made in Athens by Emile Gilliéron *fils*, the *grand specialist* of his era, in what thus became his first ever solo exhibition and the earliest for the Museum as well.

Our contribution will present all available evidence regarding the background, organisation, catalogue and artefacts presented in that historic exhibition with an emphasis on exhibits which still survive today. We will be placing this momentous occasion in its contemporary context and within the chronicle of the production of replicas in the National Archaeological Museum and their worldwide dispersal.

Mnemosyne Rice

“Serious, important, overcrowded”: The replicas in the Minoan Room at Burlington House

The 1936 Burlington House Exhibition was Arthur Evans’ crowning achievement as a museum curator, and his swansong as a scholar. It is significant, therefore, that he made heavy use of replicas in the Minoan Room, displaying them alongside original artefacts. In this paper, I analyse the display of these replicas at Burlington House, and intertwine this analysis with discussion of their object biographies and wider significances for Minoan archaeology. Famous examples of replicas used in the 1936 Exhibition include the Snake Goddess figurines, the Boxer Rhyton, and the Chieftain Cup. I contrast the use of replicas with the display of fakes, particularly the ivory ‘religious’ objects (e.g. the Boy-Gods). One of the most interesting cases is a replica of a fake: the Boston Goddess. Evans did not restrict himself to these iconic images; he also had need for replicas of more ‘everyday’ objects, including pottery, illustrating the scientific importance of replicas. What underpins the display of these various types of replicas is a desire to represent archaeological realities and fantasies, a line which can become blurred in the act of copying (or completing) an artefact. In his final and definitive exhibition to the public, replicas punctuated Evans’ displays, completing his vision of the Minoan past.

Public perceptions of the Minoans in 1936

My contribution to the workshop explores some of the ideas and expectations that nonspecialists visiting the 1936 exhibition may have entertained about the Minoan world. I examine a number of relevant works of the interwar period, ranging from historical novels to Mills & Boon romances and thrillers, and especially the universal histories published by H.G. Wells (*The Outline of History*) and Oswald Spengler (*The Decline of the West*). Now largely forgotten, these universal histories were bestsellers at the time, and more widely read not only than Evans's *Palace of Minos*, but also than archaeological publications aimed at the general public. The ideas expressed in such works offer an interesting counterpoint to the image of the Minoan world expressed in the 1936 exhibition.
