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Secret Signs and Sleeping Portraits

BY BRIAN ALLISON

The scruffy piece of machine-made paper displaying three tiny sketches of a male head had been folded, obscuring the following inscription: 'Debussy by Blanche. Dieppe. Summer 1902'. Presumably the paper had been folded for many years or the art work would not have languished at the bottom of a box of unidentified works-on-paper.

The inscription was written by the composer Percy Grainger who was introduced to French Impressionist composer, Claude Debussy, by the society painter, Jacques-Emil Blanche. Though far from 'masterworks', the tiny drawings provide documentary evidence of the meeting of the three artists.

This discovery has been one of a number of recent finds generated by the relocation of the Grainger Museum collections.

In August 2003, it was discovered that the Grainger Museum was suffering the indignity of substantial rising damp. No damage had been done to the collections, but due to the magnitude of the proposed remedial work required to solve the moisture problem, it was considered appropriate to relocate the entire collection to alternative storage venues.

The often mammoth task of moving the contents of a domestic house can create extraordinary tension and anxiety for the occupants. The project of relocating more than 150,000 items of highly significant cultural material generates headaches that are unique and seemingly never ending.

Unlike shifting the contents of a house, it is not appropriate to wrap the museum collection in old newspaper and stack the resultant bundles in boxes

salvaged from the local supermarket.

The Grainger Collection's first relocation from New York to Melbourne in the 1940s and 1950s in steamer trunks packed with straw, wood shavings and paper pulp seems crude by today's standards. Acid-free enclosures fabricated from polypropylene plastic, calcium carbonate-buffered cardboard, supported with urethane-ether foam were purchased. Fragile items are now housed in boxes custom-made to support vulnerable details. At least three pieces of the Museum's 400–500 year old Mamluk pottery collection had already been broken (and subsequently mended) sometime in the 19th century, therefore packaging that provides multi-point support was designed for this relocation.

Safe passage for an artefact like the Museum's orchestral Erard harp can only



Carefully packed items from the Grainger collection await relocation.



Grainger Museum staff assess materials in the collection while Beethoven looks on.

be guaranteed if the instrument is literally suspended within a three dimensional wooden frame.

The costume and textile collection has required substantial repackaging and preventive conservation measures. Some of the silk costumes, for example, have not stood up well to the ravages of time. In past centuries silk fibres were weighted with metallic salts; unfortunately, this process accelerates the deterioration of the fibres until they weaken and 'shatter'. Some costume and textile items require internal and external support systems, others are rolled or stored flat.

If a box of household articles goes missing in transit from House A to House B, most families would philosophically accept that this was just an added cost to the financial drain of moving house. Museum staff, in addition to guarding against breakages, are responsible for tracking the entire collection during relocation. This assumes that all Museum items are catalogued and thus identifiable.

Over the past eight months, Grainger Museum staff have been engaged in fast-tracking the process of electronically cataloguing the collection. In some instances, catalogue entries are the briefest single-line description. More significant items motivate research and finer detailed documentation. What has been achieved in eight months, would, within normal programs, have taken two to three years.

And it is this process of appraisal and documentation, undertaken within a concentrated timeframe by the same staff, that has delivered unexpected gains — notably, greater levels of understanding concerning the collection and by extrapolation, greater insights into the Percy Grainger 'story'.

Published Grainger biographies, the recent feature film *Passion* and Grainger's autobiographical writings, present controlled and edited versions of the composer's life story. When Museum staff are forced to investigate the minutiae of the collection: to list and catalogue overlooked items, and make connections between hitherto unrelated artefacts, a fuller narrative of the artist's life is revealed.

Carol Campbell, a specialist in textile conservation, was engaged to prepare the costume collection for relocation. During the process of assessing each item (and there are in excess of 900 pieces) she began to notice a very subtle idiosyncratic labelling system presumably instigated by Grainger himself. Certain items of clothing and textile accessories display a tiny machine-made tag sown discreetly into each individual fabric item's folds. The white cotton tags are inscribed with 'MORS TID', in a cursive script, mechanically produced in red thread.

A call to the University of Melbourne's School of Languages resulted in the inscription translated from the Danish as 'Mother's Time'. Percy Grainger's almost obsessively close relationship with his mother is no secret,



The Grainger Museum costume collection includes haute couture clothing purchased overseas by Grainger and his mother.



Examples of the 'Mors Tid' inscription, discovered during the relocation of the Grainger collection, here sewn into a cotton tag and written on a brush.

yet until now, this act of veneration, or perhaps part-fetish, in the definitive sense of the word, has not been documented.

What is more intriguing, however, is the discovery that certain costume items have been embellished with loosely

hand-sown red cotton — again positioned discreetly — with indecipherable symbols that are almost calligraphic in nature. Was this the frenzied act of a recently bereaved son (Grainger's mother, suffering the final stages of syphilis, died through suicide in 1922) marking his mother's clothes



The inventive bag that the child Percy Grainger made for his mother.



One of the original cardboard boxes used by Grainger to transport his belongings from New York to Melbourne.

as an *aide-mémoire* for a later formal labelling project, or does it have a more obscure meaning?

Following Rose Grainger's death her son self-published a lavish, limited edition book titled *Photos of Rose Grainger*. In the introduction he wrote a

chronology of her life and mentioned:

About 1894
Received from her son, as a birthday gift...several of his compositions presented in an elaborately decorated cover or bag sewn by him and consisting of cardboard, lace,

scrapwork, kitchen curtains, part of a stocking, small stars of silver paper, etc.

After reading this excerpt, Campbell solved the ongoing riddle of a wild patchwork design — a collage worthy of an abstract expressionist painter — that had floated on the surface of the Grainger Costume and Textiles collection for some years without ever being placed in an appropriate home. Grainger's fascination with experimental costume design may have started at age twelve with the fabrication of this simple, but very unorthodox bag.

Further scrutiny of the 'Unidentified Works-on-Paper' box led to the identification of a simple, elegant pencil portrait of a young girl. Once removed from its glassine enclosure, a registration or catalogue number was clearly visible. Foreign to today's cataloguing systems, the inscription appeared to be one of Grainger's inventory marks used to track the first relocation of the Museum's artefacts. After retrieving his hand-written inventory from the Museum's archive, the drawing was identified as a portrait of Gerda Larsen, daughter of Knud Larsen (1865–1922), celebrated artist and member of the Royal Danish Academy.

Grainger and his entourage met the Larsen family while holidaying on the wild Jutland coast in northern Denmark. The two families continued to meet on holidays with the Graingers sitting for various pencil sketches and watercolours (the Museum holds six works by Larsen). In

a letter to his mother dated 13 September 1909, Grainger states:

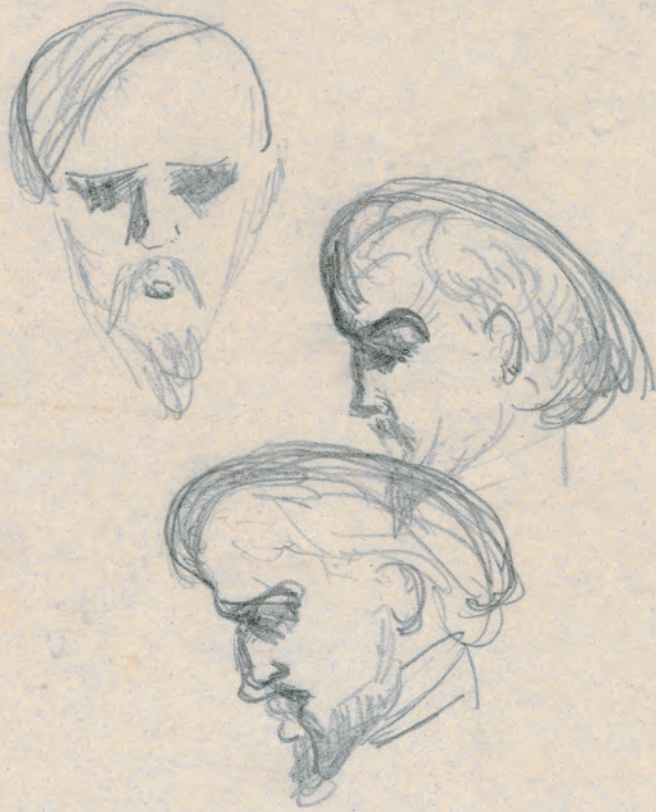
'Fancy, Knud Larsen did a nay not-bad drawing of me yesterday...and his elder girl Gerda, the less lovely one, draws simply ravishingly.'

The echoes of the first Grainger relocation project reverberate through this temporary period of instability with at times, ironic circularity. As this has been a 'preserve all — discard nothing' museum, many of the original crates, steamer chests and boxes (some with wood shavings still intact) were kept and are now being catalogued and packaged as significant artefacts, when in the 1940s and 1950s they were considered purely vessels for transporting important museum objects.

The Grainger Museum is an autobiographical museum and the original relocation was undertaken by its namesake. Given that Percy Grainger was totally untrained and inexperienced in the applied science of museology, the successful listing, packaging, and relocation of the precious evidence of his creative life, half way around the world by various cargo vessels, was an extraordinary achievement — that in a sense, humbles the present relocation project.

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While the Grainger Museum building is closed, interested researchers may access the collection through the Special Collections Reading Room at the Baillieu Library.



Zeichnung by Blanche.
Düsseldorf. Sommer
1902.