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Willi Fels: Collector and Patron

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Abstract

The subject of this dissertation is Willi Fels (1858-1946). It begins with a biography of Fels, Chapter 1 explores his collection, Chapter 2 his patronage of the Otago Museum and Chapter 3 his legacy in the form of younger family members who also gave generously to the arts.
Preface

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation and gratitude to my supervisor Dr Erika Wolf and to the Otago Museum, especially to Moira White for her assistance with images. I would like to thank my family, friends and flatmates for their support throughout the year. A big thank you is also due to my partner Campbell Ryland for his help and encouragement.

Also thanks to Donald Kerr, Special Collections Librarian at Otago University for suggesting this topic.
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**Introduction**

Willi Fels was an important figure in the cultural history of Dunedin. A German Jewish immigrant, Fels arrived in Dunedin in 1888 with his young family. Fels’ father-in-law, Bendix Hallenstein, gave him a job with his rapidly growing retail clothing business. Fels was made managing director of Hallenstein Brothers in 1895. His job enabled him to earn sufficient money to travel frequently to Europe and indulge his passion for collecting. Fels was a collector his entire life and a dedicated patron of the Otago Museum for almost thirty years.

This dissertation begins with a biographical sketch of Fels and his family. There is a wealth of genealogical information available, particularly concerning the Hallenstein branch of the family. In fact almost all secondary sources concerning Fels have been either purely biographical, such as his entry in the New Zealand Encyclopaedia, or only in relation to other family members, for example Robyn Notman’s master’s thesis, “Dora de Beer: A Privileged Life.” This dissertation aims to go beyond recitation of biographical events to develop an understanding of Fels’ personality and his place in Dunedin’s cultural history through analysis of his collection, and his contribution to the local community.

**Chapter 1: Fels as a collector** explores Fels’ impressive collection of more than 80,000 items from all over the globe. The items have been organised into categories and the artefacts analysed are in most cases representational of the sorts of objects in the
collection. Almost all of these items are in the Otago Museum Collection and I am indebted to the staff for allowing me access to these important primary resources. This chapter also attempts to get behind the item and explore Fels’ possible motive for acquiring them. The literature of psychology, museum studies and consumer theory has been drawn upon to inform this analysis.

Chapter 2: Fels as a Patron turns to examine Fels’ involvement with the Otago Museum. This contribution was on many levels; financial, administration and also directly to the collections. Alan McRobie’s master’s thesis, “An Administrative History of the Otago Museum,” is an important resource for this chapter; as is the Otago Museum Annual Reports. In order to establish a context for Fels’ contribution, a brief examination of Jewish philanthropy is included in this chapter.

The final chapter, Chapter 3: Fels’ Legacy, examines Fels’ extended family and younger relations, many of whom have contributed significantly to the arts in New Zealand. Of particular importance and given prominence in this chapter, are Charles Brasch, Esmond de Beer, Dora and Mary de Beer and Ian and Elespie Prior. The work of Robyn Notman proved invaluable for this chapter, as have the rich resources for Charles Brasch including his important autobiography Indirections: A Memoir 1909-1947. The recently published Ian and Elespie Prior: Memoir of Marriage is another excellent source of information.
The most important contributing factor for this dissertation is the wealth of archival material found in the Charles Brasch, literary and personal papers, held at the Hocken Collections Library in Dunedin. These documents include letters, diaries, speeches and newspaper clippings. Many letters and speeches are in Fels’ own hand. The diaries are appointment note books which, while incredibly difficult to read, are a previously untapped resource filled with interesting information. Important also are files gathered by Charles Brasch concerning his grandfather such as obituary notices and genealogical details. All of these incredibly important primary sources enable invaluable insight into the sort of person Fels was.

As mentioned above, Willi Fels was a collector, so what is a collector, a collection and how can we define these terms? Joseph Alsop states, “To collect is to gather objects belonging to a particular category the collector happens to fancy...”1 Krzysztof adds that these objects are “... kept temporarily or permanently out of the economic circuit, afforded special protection in enclosed places adapted specifically for that purpose and put on display.” 2 Baekeland distinguishes the collector from the accumulator or hoarder by suggesting the accumulator will gather any item, indiscriminately, putting it aside for a rainy day, where as a collector “… actively seeks out only certain kinds of objects in which he is interested,”3 corresponding with Alsop’s definition. Baekeland also points

1 Joseph Alsop *The Rare Art Traditions: the history of art collecting and its linked phenomena wherever these have appeared.* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982): 76.


out the differences between the collector and the art lover. He argues that art lovers do not desire to possess the items they admire, even if they do purchase some objects, art lovers would not go to the lengths a collector would to own art. From these definitions, two things can be found to distinguish the collector from the ordinary person. Firstly, a special attachment and reverence for particular objects, and secondly, a desire for possession and repeated acquisition.

It is hard to determine how Fels' developed characteristics though as a collector he undoubtedly had them. Muensterberger suggests that a desire to collect can spring from neglect or trauma during infancy where an object such as a teddy bear, was given to provide comfort instead of human affection. The object then becomes a reassurance, a security and repeated acquisition guards against a renewal of feelings of loss or anxiety. There is no evidence however of that Fels suffered any particular childhood trauma. Although there is not a lot of mention of his parents on Fels' diaries or letters, absence of this sort of documentation does not on its own suggest a breakdown in the relationship.

Baekeland mentions briefly the role of collecting as a social advancement, particularly in the case of the self made-man. This is a potential motive for Fels, especially considering the fact he then donated his collection to the community, boosting his civic status. The

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4 Baekeland, 46.
6 Muensterberger, 11.
7 Baekeland, 46.
importance Fels placed on education and his own intense interest in history suggests a more genuine motive however.

Pearce accentuates the importance of the connection with the object as the inspiration of a desire to collect. She states, "Objects are not inert or passive; they help us to give shape to our identities and purpose to our lives."\textsuperscript{8} Pearce discusses the 'magic' properties of objects; their ability to transcend time, to "embody human purposes and experiences" and the ability to translate these characteristics on to the collector.\textsuperscript{9} As shall be explored in this dissertation Fels certainly felt a special connection to the objects he collected. Deeply interested in history and other cultures perhaps Fels felt that the lessons and mysteries of the past could be revealed to him through possessing the artefacts of great civilisations.


\textsuperscript{9} Pearce: 166, 170, 173.
Biography

Willi Fels was born on the 17th of April in 1858 at Halle an der Weer, Braunschweig, Germany. His parents, Heinemann Wilhelm Fels and Käptchen Hallenstein were German Jews. In 1870 Fels began attending a Jewish school in Hamburg that was run by his father’s cousin, Albert Fels. In 1873 Fels attended a different school, where he was introduced to science and lost much of his religious conviction, although he would continue to be interested in spirituality and religion. Fels was attracted to history and antiquity from an early age. This was probably natural for a boy growing up in Germany when Neo-Classicism was very much in fashion and the exciting discoveries of fellow countryman Heinrich Schliemann in Greece were taking place. Esmond de Beer recalled that in Lügele, near where Fels lived, was a ‘watering place’, perhaps some sort of ornamental fountain, which was embellished with Neo-Classical motifs and which may have played a formative role in Fels’ appreciation of antique art. While Fels wanted to pursue his interests in history and classics further at university, he followed his father’s footsteps and took over the family textile mill at Neuhaus.

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11 ‘Genealogical notes.’ Misc-MS-0566. Hocken Collections. Fels attended the 1936 meeting of The World Congress of the Faiths and knew the mystic Sir Francis Younghusband, this is one indication of his interest in theology. Speech and Membership Application Brochure for The World Congress of the Faiths. ‘Various Addresses by Willi Fels.’ c. 1937. MS-0996-010/107. Charles Brasch Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena.

12 Esmond de Beer to Dr Christopher Ehrhardt, 5 January 1975. Misc-MS-0244. Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena.

In 1881 Fels's uncle, Bendix Hallenstein, visited Germany with his family. Fels met Sara, Bendix's eldest daughter, and they were married. The union of Sara and Fels was most pleasing to Bendix, who wrote: "No two persons could be more suited in their tastes than Sara and Willi, the boy in his disposition and character harmonising with the girls own simple nature."14 The newlyweds settled in Germany.

Bendix Hallenstein, Fels' father-in-law, had moved to New Zealand in 1863 and quickly became a successful businessman, owning several general stores and becoming involved in local politics. In 1873 Bendix opened the first factory for the manufacture of clothing in New Zealand. The supply of imported ready made clothing that Bendix sold in his stores was unreliable and irregular and yet the population and demand for clothing was increasing.15 Bendix quickly realised that in order to move the stock quickly he would need to open a retail chain focussing on clothing separate from his general stores, and opened the first Hallenstein Brothers and Company retail store in 1876 in Dunedin on the corner of Princes Street and the Octagon.16 In 1888 Bendix asked Fels to move to Dunedin to work for the firm as a traveller, visiting the many retail stores throughout the country. Several factors may have motivated Fels' acceptance of this proposal. Sara did


16 Vickerman, 37.
not like living in Germany,¹⁷ and this situation was compounded by a fire in 1887 at the
factory that Fels managed.¹⁸ As the factory was destroyed in this conflagration, Fels was
doubtlessly ready for a new start. Fels arrived in Dunedin with £8000 to invest in
Hallenstein Brothers; this large sum clearly indicates that even at a youthful age he had
achieved considerable success as a businessman.¹⁵ Bendix purchased the young couple a
home in close proximity to his own.²⁰ The house became known as 'Manono,' the
Tahitian word for rock, a pun on Fels' German surname, which came from the biblical
saying "I am the rock (Fels) on whom you shall build."²¹ Fels was made a naturalised
British Citizen in 1890.²²

Fels became involved with Hallensteins at a time of prosperity. The company opened
stores in Christchurch in 1876, Auckland in 1878, Napier, Wanganui, and Invercargill in
1879, Ashburton, Nelson, New Plymouth, Thames, Gisbourne, Hastings, Palmerston

¹⁷ Dora or Mary de Beer to Charles Brasch, Date unknown, Hong Kong. ‘Misc Letters
relating partic. to Family History’ 1789-1967. MS-0996-003/226 Charles Brasch:
Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena.
¹⁹ Louise Shaw, “Hallenstein Brothers and Company, 1876-1906: the early years of mass
retailing in New Zealand (Postgraduate Diploma Theses, University of Otago, 1994): 10.
²⁰ The house Bendix purchased for Fels was across the road from the Hallensteins.
Vickerman, 66.
²¹ Fels wrote that the passage was from Samuel II Chapter 22, Verse 2. ‘Willi Fels Notes
on Families’ 1818-1925. MS-0096-010/110. Charles Brasch Literary and Personal
Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena. The name was
suggested by Dr Wilhelm Solf, Governor of German Samoa, who was a friend of Fels’.
²² Gloria Margaret Strathern, ‘FELS, Willi, C.M.G.’, from An Encyclopedia of New
Zealand, edited by A.H. Lintock, originally published in 1966. Te Ara – The
Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 11-Jul-2005
North, Greymouth, Hokitika and Reefton branches appeared between 1883 and 1884. This sheer number of stores indicates that the healthily growing company was largely unaffected by the economic depression of the 1880s. Fels initially worked as a traveller, journeying throughout the country to the various stores checking on stock levels, placing orders, and attending to other duties. During the late 1880s Bendix progressively handed management of the business over to Fels, Isidore de Beer, and Emil and Percy Halsted. In 1890 Hallenstein Brothers was made a limited liability company with Fels at the head of its board of seven directors.

Helene, Fels oldest child, was born in Neuhaus in 1882 and followed by Emily Elizabeth in 1884. After the move to Dunedin, the family grew to include Kate in 1888 and Harold in 1891. Harold, Fels’ youngest child and only son, joined Hallensteins after finishing school but was called to duty in the First World War. He died on 1 October 1917, during preparations for an advance on Paaschendale. Both Harold and Frank Poland, another Dunedin soldier, were killed instantly when a shell exploded close to where they were unpacking ammunition. He was buried near Ypres. Fels was devastated by Harold’s death, marking the anniversary with a small black cross for the rest of his own life.

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23 Vickerman, 47.
24 Vickerman, 45.
25 Vickerman, 48.
Fels was a collector for most of his life. Beginning as a child with stamps and coins, Fels extended his interests to encompass ceramics, (particularly Wedgwood and glassware, especially Venetian and German,) books and manuscripts, (including illuminated medieval examples,) weapons from the exotic far and Middle East, items from Tibet, Japan and China and also the material culture of Oceania and the Māori of New Zealand. Fels had intended Harold to inherit the collection; most likely because he was the only son and not necessarily due to any special interest in collecting. Fels' first dealing with the museum was in 1918, when he instigated the employment of H.D. Skinner as the Assistant Curator and lecturer in Anthropology, even paying half of Skinners salary for five years. H.D Skinner was a New Zealander by birth and had cultivated an interest in Māori material culture since his boyhood, although he initially trained as a zoologist. After World War One, in which Skinner fought in Gallipoli, he married and settled in England to study Anthropology. He was an ideal choice for the museum position. Fels and Skinner worked closely together; under their guidance the museum grew to an outstanding institution of cultural wealth. In 1924 Fels gave his first gift of items to the museum. He continued this philanthropy until his death in 1946, contributing both money

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27 I was unable to find any record of collecting interests in letters written by Harold except one in which he refers to a record collection which he was building up under the supervision of Fels’ brother Alfred. Harold Fels to Willi, Sara and (children) Fels, 26 June 1914. ‘Letter from Harold Fels to his parents and sisters following Helene Brasch’s death’ 26 June 1914. MS-0996-010/128. Charles Brasch: Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hīkina.


and upwards of 80,000 items from his collection. In 1936 Fels was made a Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George (C.M.G.) for his contributions to education through his patronage of the Otago Museum.\(^{30}\)

Fels’ cultural interests also extended to literature, music, theatre and opera. Brasch recounted that Fels read “…history, archaeology, biography, travel, botany and books on the material he collected; especially works about Italy and the Renaissance and about the classical world, and translations of the classics.”\(^{31}\) Fels frequently attended plays and operas, both in Dunedin and during his extensive travels.\(^{32}\)

Fels had a wide social circle and belonged to several clubs and organisations. His work and interests enabled him to associate with a wide variety of people, including the upper echelons of Dunedin’s academic and business communities. Fels was a member of the Classical Association, where he occasionally gave addresses. He also belonged to the Otago Institute, which later became the Otago chapter of the Royal Society of New Zealand. Fels acquired many associates through his interest in Māori artefacts and his dedication to the welfare of the museum. They included Frederick Chapman (a prominent Dunedin lawyer, who had a collection of Māori artefacts that he donated to the Otago

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\(^{30}\) (Author Unknown) *The Evening Star* Thursday January 2\(^{nd}\) 1936 ‘Newspaper issues/pages relating to Willi Fels and end of World War II’ MS-0996-010/117. Charles Brasch: Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections *Uare Taoka o Hākena*.

\(^{31}\) Brasch, 54.

\(^{32}\) For example, in Austria during September 1935 Fels attended *Figaro’s Wedding, Peer Gynt, Das Rheingold and Die Walküre* all in the same week. Willi Fels’ Diary 1934-1936, entries for September 1, 3, 4, 6, 1935. MS-0096-010/083. Charles Brasch: Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections *Uare Taoka o Hākena*. 

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Museum), Augustus Hamilton and James Thompson (both of whom were directors of the
Dominion Museum.\textsuperscript{33} Other interesting people that Fels associated with included
Wilhelm Solf, the Governor of German Samoa (1900-1911), and Professor de Geer, a
pioneer scholar of geo-chronology.\textsuperscript{34} He also met Sir Ernest Rutherford in 1925.\textsuperscript{35}

Fels enjoyed the outdoors. He took great pride in his garden, gathering plants from all
over the world. In October of 1928 Fels delivered a speech to the Classical Association
about an asphodel plant that he himself had dug from Taormina in Sicily and grown in
New Zealand. Brasch also recalls Fels collecting clippings and seedlings while walking
through Dunedin bush.\textsuperscript{36} Fels' interest in gardening and botany was often connected to
history and the classical world. For example, Fels' speech on the asphodel discusses the
flower's place as a symbol of death and the underworld in Greek mythology.\textsuperscript{37} Fels used

\textsuperscript{33} Peter Spiller. 'Chapman, Frederick Revans 1849 - 1936'. Dictionary of New Zealand
Biography, updated 7 April 2006; R.K. Dell. 'Hamilton, Augustus 1853 - 1913'.
Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, updated 7 April 2006; N. De B. Hornibrook.
'Thomson, James Allan 1881 - 1928'. Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, updated 7
Museum was incorporated with the National Art Gallery to form the Museum of New

\textsuperscript{34} Skinner, 9, 12.

\textsuperscript{35} Willi Fels' Dairy 1922-1929 entry for November 5 1925. MS-0996-010/081 Charles
Brasch Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o
Hākena.

\textsuperscript{36} Brasch, 122.

\textsuperscript{37} 'Address by Willi Fels titled 'Papers on Otago Museum & others read to University
Club.' c.1930, 1944. MS-0996-010/103 Charles Brasch Literary and Personal Papers
(ARC-0124) Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena.
urns, statues and even columns from old buildings in his landscaping to conjure up the fantasy of an ancient Greek garden.38

Fels was a keen tramper and member of the Dunedin Naturalist Field Club. He particularly enjoyed the Manapouri, Te Anau and Wakatipu areas. Fels passed on his passion for New Zealand's scenery and enjoyment of physical activity to his wider family. Fels' eldest daughter, Helena, was the first European woman to see the falls which now bear her name, reputedly one of the most beautiful waterfalls in Doubtful Sound. The Emily Pass was named after his second eldest daughter, who crossed the pass known for its challenging and intimidating peaks.39 Fels also enjoyed less strenuous walks in Dunedin and its local environs; Charles Brasch recounts a regular weekend walk up Flagstaff hill, enjoying the peaceful bush and beautiful views.40

Fels was not outspoken in his political beliefs, which tended to be liberal.41 The World Wars deeply affected him. Brasch articulated Fels' philosophy before 1914 as one of hope for the new worlds, which he hoped would be able to inherit the wisdom of Europe without any of its negative history.42 Until 1914 Fels saw the future as bright. Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, he was the German Consul for Dunedin, a role that

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38 Brasch, 53.
40 Brasch, 121-122.
42 Brasch, 55.
he inherited from Bendix Hallenstein. With war, which cost him a beloved son and a
nephew, Fels’ outlook seems to have changed somewhat. Fels dedicated himself more
fully to New Zealand and separated himself from his German connections, stating matter
of factly that he did not remain friends with his schoolmates after the First World War.43
With the rise of National Socialism and the onset of the Second World War, Fels was
profoundly disturbed by events in Germany. Fels was a keen supporter of the Dunedin
charter of the League of Nations, later the United Nations, acting as its secretary during
the difficult wartime period. However, Brasch indicates that faced with Nazism Fels was
left confused and was upset at his inability to help.44

In 1946 Fels suffered from a series of heart attacks that left him bed-ridden for three
months.45 He lapsed in and out of awareness, at times able to lucidly organise his affairs
or coherently converse with visitors, but at other times uncertain of where he was.46 His
beloved grandson Charles and his daughters Emily and Kate nursed him through his
illness. Fels died on the 29th of June, 1946, in his home Manono on London Street in
Dunedin. As per his request, the funeral procession passed the Otago Museum entrance
and paused for a moment. Skinner, in many ways a kindred spirit of Fels, wrote in the
Annual Report for the year that “With [Fels’] death ends the most important era since

44 Brasch, 319.
45 Brasch, 416.
46 Brasch, 422-423.
1868 in Otago Museum History. He was cremated and his ashes were buried in Dunedin’s Southern Cemetery.

Chapter 1: Fels as a Collector

Willi Fels collected throughout his lifetime. He began as a boy with coins and stamps and never lost his enthusiasm for the study and accumulation of objects. In a way Fels' collecting continued even after his death, when purchases made by the Fels Fund were added to the Otago Museum’s holdings. Fels' gave over 80,000 items to the Otago Museum and 400 books to the Otago University Special Collections Library. These items ranged from 5,400 ancient Greek and Roman coins to Māori trade beads and from Wedgwood sugar bowls to a first edition of Algernon Swinburne’s *Songs Before Sunrise* (1917). At first glance this collection appears to be a crazy eclectic mix. This chapter will consider how this collection may reveal aspects of the collector's personality and will examine why Fels collected what he did. Why was he drawn to particular items? This chapter will look at Heinrich Schliemann, who Fels greatly, in order to discern something of his attitude towards collecting. Where appropriate, Fels’ collecting methods will also be noted as they help to paint a bigger picture of the physical act of collecting.

Heinrich Schliemann was something of a personal hero for Fels. Born in Mecklenburg, Germany in 1822, Schliemann rose to fame during the 1870’s with his excavation at Hisarlik, the purported site of the city of Troy from Homer’s *Iliad*. The myth of Schliemann’s life begins with his impoverished upbringing and the stimulation of his imagination by stories about the excavations of Pompeii and the heroes of Troy. Schliemann dedicated his life, from his boyhood, to finding Priam’s legendary city. His
business investments and money earned from them were simply steps towards achieving his dream. In 1870 he discovered a remarkable cache of treasures, including jewellery that he believed belonged to the beautiful Helen of Troy. Schliemann also excavated in 1874 at Mycenae, where he uncovered grave circles rich in gold and items of amazing craftsmanship. Schliemann believed he had discovered the graves of the Atrides and famously declared, “I have looked at the face of Agamemnon.”

Schliemann’s achievements were many and legendary, especially in Germany, the land of his birth. Traill suggests that “In Germany Schliemann’s autobiography was widely read, providing young people with a model of a man who, through determination and hard work, succeeded in achieving his childhood dream.” Fels certainly read the autobiographical introduction to Ilios and probably the biography by Emil Ludwig, which was commissioned by his wife Sophie Schliemann. In the 1970’s, well after Fels’ death, the accuracy and reliability of Schliemann’s archaeological findings and other information came into question. The biographical aspects of Schliemann’s life that Fels

so admired have been proven to be almost a complete fabrication, manufactured by Schliemann himself to enhance the romantic appeal of his story.\footnote{David Traill "Schliemann's 'Dream of Troy': The Making of a Legend" \textit{The Classical Journal} No 81 (1985): 13-24.}

Fels presented many speeches to the Association of Friends of the Museum, the Royal Society and the Classical Society. While always meticulously researched, many of these addresses were aimed towards a general public; hence their content is often more entertaining than purely academic in nature. One such address traces historical accounts of famous and infamous figures receiving a 'box on the ear'.\footnote{Box on the Ear.' ‘Address by Willi Fels titled 'Papers on Otago Museum & others read to University Club.' MS-0996-010/103. Hocken Collections.} Fels also enjoyed recounting adventures he had experienced while travelling, such as a trip to Venice where Fels and his wife unintentionally happened upon a festival to celebrate the meeting of the King and Queen of Italy with the German Emperor and Empress.\footnote{W. Fels Various Talks’ c.1934. MS-0996-010/105 Charles Brasch Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections \textit{Uare Taoka o Hākena}.} These addresses display Fels' interest in history and classical culture, and many make mention of Schliemann. One such address to the Classical Society on 6 May 1925 focused completely on Schliemann and discussed at length the little known fact of Schliemann's American citizenship, which he used to secure a divorce from his first wife.\footnote{Address by Willi Fels titled ‘Schliemann.’ Contains article by John A Scott \textit{The Classical Journal} April 1922 vol XVII p404-405. MS-0996-010/101 Charles Brasch Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections \textit{Uare Taoka o Hākena}.} Interestingly, this point was eliminated from the English edition of Schliemann's autobiographical notes in \textit{Ilïos} because his publishers believed the English readers would
not take Schliemann’s theories seriously if they knew he was a divorcé.\textsuperscript{55} The address illuminates the facets of Schliemann that Fels admired. He was not bothered by the divorce, delivering the information in a neutral tone. The fact that Fels considered this minor personal detail of Schliemann’s life, unrelated to archeology or classics, worth recounting suggests in itself that Fels believed all aspects of Schliemann’s life interesting and worthy of discussion. Fels seems to admire three key things about Schliemann: his memory and the related ability to acquire languages, Schliemann’s realization of his childhood dream, and his financial self sufficiency. Fels’ address begins with stories related to Schliemann’s memory prowess and his multi-lingual ability. Schliemann supposedly spoke Latin, modern and ancient Greek, English, French, Dutch, Swedish, Polish, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Arabic as well as his native German, all by the age of 36.\textsuperscript{56} He claimed to have learnt Dutch, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese fluently in only six weeks each.\textsuperscript{57} Fels admiringly recounts Schliemann’s application of this method to learn Turkish in six weeks.\textsuperscript{58} Fels himself was at least bi-lingual, speaking German and English, may have spoken Yiddish, and most probably read ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew. Hence, he clearly would have appreciated the skill and difficulty of learning languages.

\textsuperscript{55} Professor Roy C. Hicleinger? To Fels, August 27 1924. ‘Address by Willi Fels titled ‘Schliemann’’ MS-0996-010/101. Hocken Collections.

\textsuperscript{56} C.W. Ceram \textit{A Picture History of Archeology} (Thames and Hudson 1962):50. Also Trail, \textit{Treasure and Deceit} 17, 21-22, 25-28 especially 21-22 for an account of Schliemann’s method for learning English and French.

\textsuperscript{57} Trail, \textit{Treasure and Deceit}: 22

\textsuperscript{58} ‘Address by Willi Fels titled ‘Schliemann’.’ MS-0996-010/101. Hocken Collections.
Fels thought highly of the fact that Schliemann had actually realized his childhood dream of excavating Troy. In his address Fels glowing stated “What the little grocer boy had dreamed of in his youth and what had remained his ideal for life, Schliemann carried out in his manhood.” This admiration has a certain poignancy to it as Fels made a decision as a young man not to follow his desire to study history and classics at university and take over his father’s business instead. Fels seems to have particularly respected Schliemann’s economic skills and his financial self-sufficiency. Fels stated “… Schliemann was in the unique position of excavating Troy with his own money, earned by his own efforts without aid or patronage, in strong contrast to most other scientists, who were in the employ of the governments, universities or other institutions.” In an address on the origins, history, and function of museums dated 14th of January 1944, Fels similarly noted that “Schliemann, not only was a dreamer, not only did he become one of the greatest authorities on Greece – he also had a flair for finance and became a millionaire.” Why did Fels place such importance on Schliemann’s economic situation? It is highly probable that Fels, who was also a businessman, saw something he had in common with Schliemann. Fels may have seen a parallel between Schliemann putting his hard earned dollars into excavation and his own donations and gifts to the Otago Museum. This connection would have given ennobled Fels’ work and provided significant validation for his own collecting.

60 ‘Genealogical notes.’ Misc-MS-0566. Hocken Collections.
62 Address 14/1/44 in ‘Address by Willi Fels titled ‘Papers on Otago Museum & others read to University Club.’ MS-0996-010/103. Hocken Collections.
Taking this a little further, commerce was probably the closest thing most of the members of the various associations Fels was involved in had in common with Schliemann. Fels often attempted to inspire his audience in the direction of donating money to the Otago Museum, even directly calling on his listeners to give funds in an address given in 1930.\textsuperscript{63} No doubt being able to see a connection could help loosen the purse strings of his audience.

Fels amassed an impressive and beautiful collection of ‘Oriental’ arms that he donated to the Otago museum in 1924. The collection consists primarily of swords and daggers but also include pistols and shields. Most of the items originate from the Middle East and South East Asia, with the majority coming from India. Although many of the items are highly decorative, they are also functional. One such example is a sword from Burma known as a \textit{dha}. The \textit{dha} is a long sword, gently curved with a single edged blade, tapering to a point. The hilt of this example (D24.2240 Otago Museum) is a plain cylindrical shape with a shiny surface comprised of a material with a light grain, possibly ivory or a pale coloured wood. While the hilt is quite plain, the blade is an object of beauty. Three-quarters of the width of the blade is taken up with decoration. The surface has been scratched in a cross hatch pattern to form a black background. This has been overlaid with a running curvilinear vine pattern. The majority of the pattern is a silver colour, but some individual tendrils have been highlighted with a yellow-greenish material. The overall effect is one of elegant simplicity. The \textit{dha}, however, is not merely an ornamental object; as the national sword of Burma, it is possible that this very blade

\textsuperscript{63} Address 15/10/30 in ‘Address by Willi Fels titled ‘Papers on Otago Museum & others read to University Club.’ MS-0996-010/103. Hocken Collections.
was used in battle. The Burmese, armed with the *dha*, fought against the British in 1824-86. Fels did not travel to Burma or anywhere in South East Asia. It is possible therefore that Fels purchased this sword in Britain, where it may have entered the market as a spoil of war.

Another example of a beautiful but deadly sword is the *yatagan* from Turkey. The *yatagan* has an impressive ancestry, dating all the way back to the Bronze Age. The most distinctive feature of this type of sword is the wing or ear-like appendages at the end of the hilt. Fels' example (D24.2425 Otago Museum) has a hilt made from bone. Between the ‘wings’ is a band of silver filigree studded with red coral. This filigree extends to the top of the blade, tapering off on either side to form a triangle which is decorated with a large green stone. Typical of many *yatagan*, the blade is inscribed with gold Arabic script, which is typical comprised of verses from the Koran or details concerning the sword’s maker and owner. The scabbard is made from wood and covered in leather and silver filigree. Like the sword hilt, the top of the scabbard is set with coral. This sword is an impressive piece, flashy and opulent. Obviously its owner intended his opponent to be overwhelmed by his wealth as well as his swordsmanship. Most surviving *yatagan* date from 1750 to 1860. One scholar suggests that hilts

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65 Wilson, 198.
67 North, 143.
68 North, 142.
decorated with silver filigree and coral, as Fels’ example is, are of Bosnian origin and may be dated to the 1800s.  

Fels also collected weapons that were primarily functional and of minor aesthetic significance. The *kukri* is the official weapon of the Nepalese Ghurkhas, mercenary soldiers whose clients included Great Britain.  

Although decorative examples do exist, the simple appearance of Fels’ *kukri* (D24.2256 Otago Museum) suggests it was military issue. The hilt is made of dark wood, the end slightly flared at the edges. The sheath, large and wide, is made of dark leather. It contains two pockets, at least one of which holds a knife. The short blade of the *kukri* has a pronounced curve and widens in the middle. The inside curve of the blade is a sharpened killing edge. For all its fearsome and deadly appearance, which is accentuated by the lack of adornment in the Otago Museum specimen, the *kukri* has something of a romantic mythology surrounding it. One superstition is that the *kukri*, once drawn, should not be re-sheathed without first tasting blood.  

The Ghurkha themselves are renowned for their bravery, dedication and honour.  

Skinner recorded that Fels collected 200 weapons, beginning in the 1900s.  

If Fels stopped collecting weapons after his 1924 donation, then he acquired arms at the rate of

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69 North, 143. The Museum registry records Turkey however as its provenance.  

70 Wilkinson, 193.  

71 Wilkinson, 193-194.  

72 Wilkinson, 194.  

73 Skinner, 10, 14.
roughly eight to nine examples a year. This might be interpreted as an intense burst of
gusto in collecting. So why might Fels have been drawn to weapons? Susan Pearce has
noted that men often collect items that re-enforce their masculinity. It is nowadays a
commonplace that weapons are phallic symbols. Weapons and masculinity both bring
about associations of power, competition, aggression and strength. Fels does not seem to
have been a particularly aggressive or particularly individual, though it is possible that he
exhibited these characteristics in his business dealings. As a manager of a successful
business, a man of wealth and influence, and the patriarch of his family, Fels would have
been no stranger to power. However, Fels found war morally repugnant. He lost his son
and a nephew in the First World War and was an active supporter of the League of
Nations. This suggests that rather than seeing the weapons as participants in bloody
conflicts, Fels envisioned the weapons more romantically.

Collectors often see a magic about their objects, a special other worldly presence. Fels
himself romanticised artefacts. In a 1924 address, Fels discussed the discovery by
Hilarion, a school teacher, of carvings from the entrance of the Okarea pa in the remote
Ureweras. These carvings are now in the Otago Museum. Fels made a lyrical connection
between the discovery of the carvings and the story of Sleeping Beauty, casting Hilarion
as the Handsome Prince freeing the carvings from a magical sleep. The association of

74 Pearce, 212.
75 Pearce, 24, 172-174.
76 W. Fels Various Talks.’ MS-0996-010/105. Hocken Collections. See also (Author
Unknown) Otago Daily Times 20 November 1924 ‘W.F. (Willi Fels) Talks Containing
Clippings’ c.1934. MS-0996-010/106 Charles Brasch Literary and Personal Papers
(ARC-0124) Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena.
the sword with heroism is nothing new; tales of King Arthur and Excalibur are one of many examples of such symbolism. In this Romantic mode, Fels may have seen historical battles for noble causes and mighty legendary warriors reflected in the steel blades of these weapons — instead of the more likely reality of sliced flesh and bloody wounds.

Fels had a large collection of Māori and Pacific Is and artefacts. Most were tools and implements for everyday use. Weapons of various descriptions also make up a large proportion of the items. In the commemorative brochure written by Skinner at the time of Fels' death, the number of Māori items is recorded as 1,000 and the Pacific objects, 800. Among the Māori objects is a tekoteko (D24.892 Otago Museum) which originates from a river in the Hauraki region. Tekoteko are architectural sculptures which represent ancestral figures. They are found on the most important building in Māori culture, the meeting house or whare nui, at the central apex of the roof. The example in Fels' collection is a male with facial tattooing and holds a patu in its right hand. The left hand of the figure is very large and rests on its stomach. The arms have been broken off and the surface of the wood is weathered and aged, though overall the piece is relatively well preserved. Māori carving is a celebrated art and receives a fair amount of attention. Fels was more interested in the artefacts of everyday life however, items for ordinary use. He collected many fishhooks, chisels, sinkers, spear points, adze, pieces of worked stone, needles, and other implements. These were made from a variety of materials, greenstone and bone being especially prominent. Fels collected many of these items with his own hands using a technique of 'surface collecting,' which seems to be basically
systematically sifting through the top layer of soil or sand, relying on observational
powers rather than tools or the physical action of digging. It is possible that he was
taught this method by H.D. Skinner. Skinner was proficient in this technique having
Purakanui.'\footnote{Willi Fels Dairy 1906-1913, entry April 12 1911. MS-0996-010/079. Charles Brasch Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections \textit{Uare Taoka o Hākena}.} It is the first entry which makes mention of Skinner or this particular beach
which seems to have been a favourite hunting ground for artifacts. The first listing of an
item found occurs in the entry for January 1 1913 and reads, ‘Found pieces of greenstone
on sandhills at Karitane.'\footnote{Willi Fels Dairy 1906-1913, entry for January 1 1913. MS-0996-010/079. Hocken Collections.} No doubt items were found between the trip with Skinner and
this later entry, Fels simply did not record them. Perhaps his decision to note the items
provenance in 1913 indicates a turning point in his attitude towards Māori artefacts from
hobby to deliberate collection.

Evidence suggests that Fels preferred ‘surface collecting’ archaeological method of
collecting to purchasing. His admiration of Schliemann is one such clue. Fels found
Dunedin beaches to be particularly rich in Māori artefacts. Although he was genuinely
interested in Māori culture and its preservation perhaps part of the appeal was the fact he
could search for items himself, just like the archaeologists he admired. Fels' trips to local
Otago beaches are well documented, and his diaries show almost weekly excursions to
various sites as well as records of what he found there. For example, his entry for 2
December 1916 reads, ‘Purakanui, found fishhook.’80 He was often joined by younger family members on these trips and probably claimed for himself the items that the children found, recording them in his dairy, such as the entry for October 7 1916, which reads ‘With Mary [de Beer] at Purakanui; she found two needles, several fishhooks.’81 His method of searching for artefacts was recounted by Fels’s grandson Charles Brasch:

At Pipkariti and other beaches Grandfather searched the sands methodically, drawing his walking stick behind him to mark where he had gone, for what we children called Maori curios – adzes, fish-hooks of bone and shell, flint knives, drills, stone sinkers, greenstone and whale tooth pendants. The winds where constantly at work on those beaches shifting the sands about, so that buried objects were always being uncovered, and finds continued to be made for many years. I sometimes followed Grandfather’s example, and trod the surface of the sand poking among the fragments of shellfish and animal and bird bone, obsidian, the stones and wood, that marked sites once occupied. But unless I made a lucky find I was soon ready to give up; I did not learn Grandfather’s method. When I was, once, unusually lucky, and came on a good greenstone pendant, Grandfather appropriated it for his collection or for the museum; sensibly, no doubt, since it was too fine a piece to be capricious possession.82

This archaeological method was attractive on several levels; it enabled Fels to spend time with his family as well as be close in spirit to his heroes. Fels also got considerable joy from physical activity and the beauty of the Otago scenery. Fels’ methodical nature would have been well suited to the careful, systematic method of marking his passage with his stick in the sand and combing over the area in search of artefacts.


81 Willi Fels Diary 1916-1921, entry for October 7 1916. MS-0996-010/080. Hocken Collections.

82 Brasch, 18-19.
Fels was also able to purchase Māori material, and this was most probably done locally. Through his work at Hallensteins Fels travelled extensively throughout New Zealand, visiting many small towns in addition to the main centres. Some of the Māori artefacts in his collection are recorded as coming from areas outside of Dunedin but there is no evidence to suggest he excavated at these sites. Fels may have purchased Māori and Oceanic material from Captain John Bollons, an English mariner who was shipwrecked at Bluff in 1881. Bollons settled in New Zealand, married and began work on the steamers of the Marine Department, where his duties included servicing lighthouses, chartering the coast, and participating in rescue missions and scientific expeditions. Bollons developed an interest in Māori culture and natural history, and began to collect specimens on his voyages. It is likely that Fels knew Bollons and made purchases from him, as Fels was in the habit of collecting the obituaries of men he admired and/or associated with, and several obituary notices for Bollons are preserved in his papers.

The Polynesian items in Fels' collection were donated to the Otago Museum in 1924, along with the 'oriental' weapons and Māori material, as mentioned above. A large proportion of the items are ordinary tools and other objects of everyday use. One such item is the hafted adze from Fiji (D24.2007 Otago Museum). It consists of a wooden

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handle to which is lashed a sharp stone. It is a typical example of a pre-metal tool used for working timber. Fels also had a large collection of Massim lime spatulas. Massim was the name given by Europeans to the people who lived in the southwest of Papua New Guinea.\textsuperscript{85} Lime spatulas have a practical use as part of betel chewing equipment but many also have ceremonial use and are indications of social status.\textsuperscript{86} The example in Fels’ collection (D24.2186 Otago Museum) is made of a dark hard wood with anthropomorphic carvings on the handle. The free flowing curves of the carving seem visual reminiscent of Māori \textit{manaia}. This particular lime spatula from Fels’ collection has a well balanced design and a beautiful finish. It was probably a ceremonial item, given the elegance of the design and the anthropomorphic images which were potential magic.\textsuperscript{87}

Amongst Fels collection of Oceanic items are a large proportion of weapons, particularly clubs and spears. An obsidian dagger from the Admiralty Islands (D24.1890 Otago Museum) is one example of the sorts of weapons from this section of this collection. The blade, of greenish black obsidian, is roughly shaped to a point. The handle is made from a wood and painted with red and white. Perhaps more characteristic of the weapons from the Oceanic collection is a wooden Fijian throwing club (D24.1996 Otago Museum). Fergus Clune indicates that the throwing club was the most common of all personal weapons. These were used for fighting but also for hunting birds and fruit bats. The

\textsuperscript{85} Harry Beran ‘Massim’ from \textit{Arts of the South Seas: island Southeast Asia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia; the collections of the Musée Barbier-Mueller} ed Douglas Newton, (Munich; New York: Prestel, c.1999): 216.

\textsuperscript{86} Beran, 222.

\textsuperscript{87} Beran, 222.
weapon was generally thrown at the victim but could also be used as a bludgeoning instrument. Some examples, set with shells, were believed to be infused with magic power. Fels example is most likely a variety of throwing club known as an *ulatavatava*. These have fluted heads, the shape mimicking the roots of the plant they were originally made from. The smaller size clubs of this type were used for hunting.

Fels' coin collection was his pride and joy. Over most of his life Fels collected more than 5,400 coins. These included papal medals, ancient Greek and Roman coins and other coins from all over the globe dating right up to his own time. Fels presented his extensive coin collection to the museum along with approximately thirty related books and catalogues in 1939. Fels was appointed Honorary Numismatist in 1944, enabling him to catalogue and label many of the coins. The ancient Greek coins were Fels' favourites. He delivered at least two addresses on the subject; one of which he read to the Christchurch Classical Society as well as the Dunedin chapter, the other presented to the University Club. The Classical Society address carefully describes several of the Greek coins in Fels' collection. One Athenian example dated 550-450BC shows on the obverse a head of Athena, wearing a round helmet and on the reverse, an owl, the moon and an olive branch. A Corinthian example from about 400BC depicts another head of Athena.

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89 Clunie, 63.
92 Address by Willi Fels titled ‘Ancient Coins Classical Society,’ 1921-1922. MS-0996-010/099. Charles Brasch Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections *Uare Taoka o Hākena*. 

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on the reverse, on the obverse is the mythical winged horse Pegasus. Another coin, a Cretan example from Knossos, 400BC, has a head of Hera on the obverse and on the reverse a plan of the labyrinth built by Daedelous according to the myth. Fels' interest on these coins is inspired by the myths and stories which motivated their design. His address dedicates a large part of the discussion to a lyrical description of the beautiful city of ancient Greece in mythological times. He then goes on to describe in detail the story of how Athena won in combat with Poseidon the right to be the patron goddess of Athens. Fels was obviously well read on most areas of classical Greek civilisation. As well as mythology, Fels was interested in coins with historical references such as a Macedonian example dating to the time of Philip II. On the reverse of the coin is a jockey on his horse, carrying a palm of victory. Ganz suggests that this sort of knowledge, along with familiarity with treatise on coinage written by the Ancient Greeks, is mandatory for any collector. The collecting of ancient Greek coins becomes therefore an academic exercise, more than mere accumulation. This point of the potential for education found in coin collecting is continually stressed by Fels himself.

Fels also had several Roman coins in his collection. Most of these depict the Roman emperors and so must date from after 44BC when Julius Caesar broke precedent by placing his image instead of the traditional deity on the coin. Coins from this period often double as political propaganda, victories or significant events related to the

93 'Address by Willi Fels titled 'Ancient Coins Classical Society.' MS-0996-010/099. Hocken Collection.
95 Ganz, 17.
Emperor proudly proclaimed on the obverse. Fels' Roman coin collection includes examples depicting Vespasian Denarius from 75BC, Tiberious from 81BC, Augustus Denarius from 253 AD and Nero from 544AD.

Esmond de Beer believed that Fels' interest in Roman coinage was not motivated from an aesthetic sense but was purely an interest in collecting images of Emperors. While this insight is interesting because it may indicate that Fels was attracted the power inherent in the image of a mighty ruler, it does not give Fels the credit he deserves. Fels clearly had an excellent eye for good pieces, a connoisseur in all he collected, which would not be possible without an appreciation for the artistic value of the coins. Esmond also believed that Fels' was drawn to coins because of their convenience as a collectable item. Coins are easily transportable and relatively affordable which certainly would have been a plus. Fels was methodical nature in all accounts and the structured nature of collecting a whole series of coins would have suited him. Furthermore, Esmond pointed out Fels' interest in Classical coins as unique among Dunedin collectors.

There is I think a stronger argument to support Fels' interest in history and classics to explain his enthusiasm for coins from antiquity. In the addresses on coins Fels does not mention the points highlighted by Esmond as good reasons to collect coins. Fels finished the address delivered to the Classical Society with the wish that, "...my remarks have

96 Ganz, 16.
97 Esmond de Beer to Dr Christopher Ehrhardt, 5 January 1975. Misc-MS-0244. Hocken Collections.
98 Esmond de Beer to Dr Christopher Ehrhardt, 5 January 1975. Misc-MS-0244. Hocken Collections.
indicated to you the wide vistas the study of coins opens to ones eyes in regard to mythology, early craft, art, customs, games, history and geography... This explicitly shows Fels' motivation for coin collecting was not simply their convenience but sprung from a passion for knowledge and learning.

It is worth briefly mentioning that Fels' interest in coinage may have arisen from a deeper, subconscious attraction to the power of money. Like the weapons already mentioned, money is a symbol of power and strength. As a prominent and successful businessman for much of his adult life Fels may have been more aware of finance than the average person. This may have made him susceptible to symbols of power and wealth because of this concern in his everyday life.

Fels used many methods to acquire coins. In his address to the Classical society he mentions how he came across the first Greek coin he ever collected. Fels spent a month in Sicily in the beginning of 1914. He met a peasant boy and enquired if he had ever found any old coins amongst the local ruins. The boy had several; Fels purchased the lot, thus beginning his collection of ancient Greek coins.100

It is possible that Fels applied a sort of archaeological method to sites overseas as well as in New Zealand, as mentioned above. It is not hard to imagine that Fels would have been inspired to attempt a little excavating when he was visiting Greece and Rome, so close to 99 'Address by Willi Fels titled 'Ancient Coins Classical Society.' MS-0996-010/099. Hocken Collection.
100 'Address by Willi Fels titled 'Ancient Coins Classical Society.' MS-0996-010/099. Hocken Collection.
the amazing discoveries of Schliemann and Evans. In 1928 he delivered an address to the Classical Association about a plant specimen, an asphodel, he had collected near a Greco-Roman theatre in at Taormina, Sicily, and bought back to New Zealand to cultivate.\textsuperscript{101} This shows Fels had no qualms about digging around ruins, no doubt if he spotted a coin it would have been delivered to his pocket!

The final gift Fels bestowed on the Otago Museum included 300 pieces of Wedgwood.\textsuperscript{102} Wedgwood pottery was produced in England by Josiah Wedgwood. Josiah began his career in 1739 when at nine years old he started work at the family pottery.\textsuperscript{103} By 1759 he had moved into his own factory and secured a commission from Queen Charlotte by about 1765.\textsuperscript{104} Josiah’s most famous productions were ‘black basalt’ ware and ‘jasper ware’, examples of Neo-classicism. Josiah died in 1795, passing his highly successful business on to his sons.\textsuperscript{105} The Wedgwood brand persists to the present day. Fels’ collection of Wedgwood included bowls, plates, teapots, cups and saucers and other functional items, as well as luxury pieces such as perfume bottles. A large percentage of Fels’ Wedgwood collection consisted of portrait medallions.


\textsuperscript{102} Skinner, 14.

\textsuperscript{103} W.B. Honey, Wedgwood Ware. (London: Faber and Faber, 1948): 8.

\textsuperscript{104} Honey, 8,10.

\textsuperscript{105} Honey, 9.
Fels’ collection contains several pieces of ‘black basalt’ ware, one of the more famous Wedgwood products. In an attempt to mimic the colour and texture of Greek vases, Josiah refined the already existing ‘Egyptian ware’ to create a strong fine grained, black ware which responded well to polishing and shaping. Josiah named it ‘black basalt’ after the hard wearing rock and production took off from about 1769. A teapot from Fels’ collection (P46.239 Otago Museum) is characteristic of ‘black basalt ware’, strong and sturdy looking but with elegance in decoration and fine surface texture. The teapot is decorated with a shallow relief floral design which covers the body and lid. The spout and handle are quite delicately modelled in comparison to the solid bulk of the pot.

In 1774-5 Josiah began the production of ‘jasperware’. Objects made of this semi opaque material usually consisted of white bas relief on coloured ground, the translucence of the material giving the colours a soft, pastel appearance. Fels owned several examples of jasperware, including a small plaque (F46.258 Otago Museum). This plaque has a sea green background and a white relief scene, depicting the hero Bellerophon and his noble steed Pegasus. This same motif is repeated in the centre of a larger plate of darker blue (F46.265 Otago Museum) surrounded by rings of flowers and ornamentation.

Fels was no doubt attracted to Wedgwood ware because of its Neo-classical ornamentation. Wedgwood is also highly collectable, many items were produced and the brand had an international reputation resulting in the availability of Wedgwood

106 Honey, 13.
107 Honey, 13.
throughout the world. In *The Collector's Book of Wedgwood*, Klamkin suggests that the appeal of 'jasperware' and 'basalt' ware lies in its artistic value. Josiah hired artists such as John Flaxman, a major Neo-Classical artist and William Hackwood to design the pieces, elevating Wedgwood pottery beyond mere functionality.

Fels' collecting interests were wide-ranging. Fels' final donation to the museum included both Wedgwood and items from Tibet, China and Japan. Fels' collection contained several examples of Chinese snuff bottles. Snuff is a powdered form of tobacco that arrived in China from Europe in approximately 1368. The majority of snuff bottles were made of glass, as this material was light and protected its contents from humidity. Other materials included porcelain, jade and stone. Snuff bottles were often highly decorative embellished with relief designs, paint or enamel and came in a variety of shapes.

One of the snuff bottles on Fels' collection depicts a brightly coloured scene from Chinese life (F46.418). The bottle is a flattened ovoid shape, painted on white glass in vivid colours. The image shows a woman in a green *shen-i* riding on a chair carried by two male servants clad in green trousers. Next to the woman rides an impressive looking

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109 Klamkin, 18.
110 Honey, 16-17.
112 Huang and others, 47.
male, dressed in glowing red, on a black horse. This is not a scene of everyday life for a normal Chinese citizen. The costumes and transportation of the key figures suggest they belong to the upper classes for which the bottle was probably made. Some snuff bottles with scenes of people have poems inscribed on them. The attitudes of the man and woman could suggest a courtship scene.

A more unusual bottle in the collection is a blue-green bottle shaped like a lotus leaf with two pink buds (F46.416). As mentioned above, the decorative elements of the snuff bottle sometimes make reference to Chinese life. In this case the snuff bottle acts as a talisman; the lotus leaf is a symbol of good luck. The overall shape is more elongated than the previous example. Details, such as the central stalk of the leaf and the stems of the buds, are picked out in three dimensions. Three dimensional bottles are not entirely uncommon, in glass this effect is achieved by overlays of colour which are then carved away. The high relief of this style of carving is quite chunky. The relief of Fels' example is far more refined suggesting that it may be modelled in porcelain. Porcelain snuff bottles occur less frequently than glass examples. Apparently this technique was instigated by Emperor Kang Hsi of the Ching dynasty who had an interest in western art. The lotus leaf bottle, in design and delicate colouring, is a beautiful and eye catching example of the art of the snuff bottle. The three dimensional, shiny surface creates a piece with tactile as well as visual appeal.

113 Huang and others, 76. This example depicts playing children on one side, a poem on the other.
114 Huang and others, 70.
115 Huang and others, 93.
Amongst Fels' collection is a group of Japanese items known as **inro** and **netsuke**. **Inro** are a sort of pouch or container, **netsuke** a sort of ‘toggle’ used to secure the cord which enabled the inro to be hung from a **kimono** belt. Both inro and netsuke were highly decorative. **Netsuke**, in particular, became a form of intricate sculpture in miniature. While inro and netsuke were originally fashion accessories, they also had the practical function as a type of pocket. The earliest examples of these items date to the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, and they reached their peak in popularity in the early nineteenth hundreds. **Netsuke** are commonly carved from ivory, but wood and other materials are also used. **Inro** are made from thin leather, paper or wood and design are applied with by layers of lacquer. The subject matter of netsuke is often taken from mythology, religion, folklore and the natural world. This means that each netsuke should be carefully considered for symbolic meaning as well as appreciated for the artistic skill required to create these tiny yet often exquisitely detailed sculptures.

Fels' collection contains inro with and without netsuke. One charming example of an inro minus a netsuke depicts a little frog or toad (F46.413). Japanese folklore contains many references to toads in mythology as having supernatural powers and as companions.

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of various magic figures. One such gift was the toad's ability to find squeeze through small gaps or find its way out of tight situations; something Fels may have appreciated when dealing with a tricky business situation. Fels also had in his collection an inrō with a frog or toad netsuke (F46.409); perhaps Fels felt a special connection to what the frog symbolised. The frog in this example appears to be crouching on a leaf or perhaps a mushroom. There are precedents for both; a frog on a taro leaf is shown in an example by Shimizu Tomiharu, held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (17.11); a lizard is shown on a mushroom with a similar shape to Fels' example, on a nineteenth century netsuke carved by Gohō Mitani Kötsū. The inrō appears to be carved red lacquer and depicts a group of young men playing a ball game in a landscape or perhaps a garden setting. It is most likely that this scene represents a mythological story with some sort of connection to the magical powers of the toad. Remaining evidence suggests that the subject matter of netsuke and inrō were connected; however in order to met demand from Europeans in the nineteenth century for netsuke many examples were separated and as a result much visual evidence was lost.

Another example of both netsuke and inrō depicts a lion known as a shishi and a peacock, respectively (F46.408). Both the netsuke and inrō are intricately detailed. A peacock with flowing tail feathers, symbol of good fortune and happy marriages, graces the front.

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120 Both examples taken from Earle, *Fantasy and Reality*. Frog on a Taro leaf, 224. Lizard on a mushroom, private collection, 223.
of the beautiful golden inro. The peacock is drawn with fine, delicate lines. Compared to the previous example the modelling is done with shallow incisions, making the design a little difficult to see clearly. The netsuke is carved in the form of a *shishi*, a mythical guardian lion with a distinctive curly mane. These creatures are often depicted cavorting and playing, sometimes with a ball as Fels' example appears to be doing. The clear lines, vigorous modelling and lively characterisation of *shishi* netsuke is an inheritance of the woodblock print.

To complete his collection of items from the Asian world, Fels gathered pieces from Tibetan material culture. These are mostly religious artefacts. One such item is a bronze sculpture of a monk seated on an elephant (F46.405 Otago Museum). Small metal sculptures of religious figures are probably the most familiar Tibetan art form to western eyes. The Tibetans used the image of the deity for worship and mediation. Many such images were made according to a formula laid out in religious books to ensure each figure was portrayed correctly. Each attribute, gesture, even seated position contains a different symbolic meaning. The figure in Fels' collection is a monk, a subject that poses difficulties for interpretation as most locally available scholarship reproduces examples

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123 *Shishi* on a Ball, mid-18th century, unsigned, private collection, Earle, *Fantasy and Reality*, 127.
126 Gordon, 52.
depicting the Buddha or other high ranking figures. As far as I could tell, no other deity
is represented on an elephant or in the particular seated position. The iconography may
have local provenance, the monk may have been a guardian figure or a patron of the city.
Fels’ Tibetan collection also includes several examples of prayer wheels. Prayer wheels
of the type in Fels’ collection are used for personal worship. In Tibetan religious culture
even the written word is sacred and repetition is particularly important, the rotation of a
prayer wheel, which contains a prayer written on paper inside, has the affect of saying a
prayer.127 The prayer wheel, which takes little physical effort or time to turn, is an
efficient way of participating in religious ritual. Little effort or time should not however
be mistaken for lack of genuine feeling or having an arbitrary attitude towards prayer.
The sound of the wheel in motion, the beads clicking, serves as a way of remembering
the message and the observance of the gods.128 The Fels’ collection contains a
particularly beautiful prayer wheel made from bone and decorated with turquoise (F43.91
Otago Museum).

In the commemorative brochure written by Skinner after Fels’ death, he mentions that
some of the Tibetan pieces were collected by Sir Francis Younghusband, a well known
British soldier and explorer whose military campaigns took him to exotic lands such as
Nepal, Tibet, India and Africa, all in the name of Empire.129 In his later life
Younghusband became something of a mystic, founding The World Congress of the

129 Skinner, 10.
Faiths which believed in a shared spirituality of all mankind.130 Fels attended the 1936
conference of the organisation while he was in London and met with Younghusband.131
It is probably through this meeting that Fels was able to make enquiries into
Younghusband’s collection and secure the items for the Museum. This was perhaps one
way of procuring items from countries that Fels was unable to visit or that were not
available from his usual dealers.

The University of Otago Library received Fels’ extensive collection of books in 1946.
This collection of books consisted of over 400 books, 100 of which were examples of
early printing. The gift included five illuminated medieval manuscripts from France and
Italy. Two Book of Hours, a private devotional book, were in the collection. The Italian
example contains a miniature of the Arrest of Christ based on an early sixteenth century
woodcut.132 The French Book of Hours has beautiful borders of flowers and fruit in red,
blue and gold in a conventional late fifteenth-century French style. This decoration
enables the book to be compared to similar examples which come from Rouen133 and are
drafted around 1500. This particular book was purchased by Fels from a Liverpool book
dealer, Edward Howell in 1922.134 The other three manuscripts can be related to the

131 Speech and Membership Application Brochure for The World Congress of the Faiths. ‘Various Addresses by Willi Fels.’ MS-0996-010/107. Hocken Collections.
133 Manion, Vines and de Hamel, 111.
134 Manion, Vines and de Hamel, 111.
Franciscan Order. Sara Fels had a particular interest in Saint Francis of Assis and this may have inspired Fels' acquisition of these particular books. Among the early printed books was an treatise of physics based on Aristotle's writing by Saint Thomas Aquinas; a copy of a text by Pliny the Younger from 1490-1492; and a Roman prayer book from Antwerp dated to 1627. More modern books in the collection included a first edition of Algernon Swinburne's *Songs before Sunrise* (1871). Fels had also collected almost every issue of the British art journal *The Studio* since its beginnings. The librarian at the time of Fels' donation, John Harris, said "It would be almost impossible to build such a collection today. It is by far the most magnificent gift to come to the library in my time".

Fels' book collection was an important asset to the Otago University library. Fels was an avid reader but chances are he did not collect the books for that purpose. So what is the appeal of book collecting? Paul Ruxin wrote, "Books appeal to humans at every level: from the physical sensations of holding a book on your hands, feeling the rag paper, and admiring a beautiful binding or printing to the intellectual experiences reading...

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135 Manion, Vines and de Hamel, 111-113.
136 Brasch, 15.
137 (Author Unknown) *The Evening Star*, May 21 1946 'Newspaper issues/pages relating to Willi Fels and the end of World War II.' MS-0996-010/117. Hocken Collections.
140 (Author Unknown) *The Evening Star*, May 21 1946 'Newspaper issues/pages relating to Willi Fels and the end of World War II.' MS-0996-010/117. Hocken Collections.
fine writings elicit." Walter Benjamin suggests that the history of the book, such as previous owners and the period it comes from is part of the magic collectors find in books. He writes "As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired." Fels would have certainly agreed with this sentiment. It is most likely that collecting books was an extension of Fels' interest in history and his passion for learning and knowledge.

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142 Benjamin, 60.

143 Benjamin, 61.
Chapter 2: Fels as a Patron

Willi Fels was one of the most important patrons of the Otago Museum. He also gave generously to the Otago University Library. This chapter will detail the history of Fels' involvement with the Otago Museum, on an administrative level and through the gift of his collection. This chapter will also attempt to put Fels’ contributions as a patron into the wider context of Jewish philanthropy in New Zealand.

The history of the Otago Museum began more than 150 years ago. In 1851 the Dunedin Mechanics’ Institute was established. Mechanics institutes were first established in the early 19th century in Britain. These educational organizations played a part in intellectual and cultural life and were particularly important in the growth of public libraries.144 Among the Dunedin Institute’s founding members were prominent figures, including the Reverend Thomas Burns, John McGlashen, James Macandrew and Captain William Cargill.145 One of the Institute’s objectives was the establishment of a museum for the province of Otago.146 The museum began with a collection of rocks and minerals that was gathered by geologist Doctor James Hector in 1861 with the aim of creating a geological survey that represented the region’s gold rush heritage.147 While his job’s

146 McRobie, 3.
147 McRobie, 5-7.
mandate did not include the establishment of a museum, Hector took the initiative himself, adding botany and zoology specimens to the geology collection he had accumulated. In 1865 these items were temporarily displayed in the first New Zealand Exhibition in Dunedin. Modelled after the Great Exhibition of London in 1851, this fair showcased all facets of New Zealand life, with particular focus on business, industry and economic prosperity. However, it took some time for the collection to be given a more permanent home. In 1868, a museum building was officially opened. Initially, a provincial government committee administered the operations of the museum, but with the abolishment of the provinces in 1875 governance was passed to the University of Otago. In the early days, the museum was primarily a teaching collection for instruction in geology and botany, these areas of strength in the early collection. The museum did not have what is now known as a Humanities department until 1893, when Bendix Hallenstein gifted an ancient Egyptian mummy from Thebes dating to 1320-1200 BCE. The teaching mission of the museum is made clear by the fact that the Professor of Biology had the additional duty of Curator at the Museum.

Doctor Thomas Hocken was the first major donor to the Otago Museum. One of Dunedin’s prominent citizens, Dr. Hocken had a scholarly interest and an enthusiastic passion for New Zealand history and cultural artifacts. He compiled a large collection of Māori taonga, manuscripts, books, maps, visual records, and other documents concerning

148 McRobie, 6-7.
149 McRobie, 25.
150 McRobie, 58.
New Zealand and Polynesia and, in particular, the settlement of Otago.\textsuperscript{151} The collection was held at the Otago Museum in a wing named after the generous benefactor.\textsuperscript{152} This wing was opened in 1910, just two months before Dr Hocken passed away.\textsuperscript{153}

Between 1910 and 1918 the museum went through a period of stasis, perhaps owing to the event of World War I. It does not seem that any of the staff were sent to war, but no doubt people were not interested in making large donations to the museum during such a difficult period. The only point of note relevant to our story was the temporary employment of H.D Skinner for fourteen months ending in 1912. Skinner was placed in charge of the museum during the absence of Professor William Benham, the museum’s Curator since 1898.\textsuperscript{154}

Willi Fels became actively involved with the Otago Museum in 1918, when he instigated the employment of H.D. Skinner as Assistant Curator of the museum. In his master’s thesis on the administrative history of the Otago Museum, Allan McRobie claims that Benham, the Curator and Biology Professor at the time, was quite unsympathetic towards the museum, seeing it first and foremost as a tool for his biology lectures, to which he

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{152} The important documentary records would eventually find a home of their own in 1999 at the Hocken Library and Pictorial Collections. The artifacts remained in the Museum.
\item \textsuperscript{154} \textit{Otago Museum Annual Report} (Dunedin: The Museum, 1912): 4.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
gave precedence over any museum work. The Museum’s Annual Reports, written by Benham, provide some evidence to refute this assertion. In these reports, Benham makes frequent calls for donations to enhance the ethnological department of the museum. Furthermore, in 1928 he pointedly lamented the demands of his plural position, which left him unable to dedicate adequate time to either area. These shortcomings of the museum -- the obvious need for additional staff, the lack of ethnological material, and the lack of specialist care for the collections -- were already in evidence by 1918 and may have motivated Fels to take action. As an incentive for hiring an assistant with the necessary anthropological training, Fels provided £200 a year for the salary of this employee for a period of five years. Fels involvement remained anonymous, at least to the public.

A New Zealander by birth, H.D Skinner had cultivated an interest in Māori material culture since his boyhood, although he initially trained as a zoologist. Skinner served in World War One and fought at Gallipoli. In 1915 Skinner was discharged from the military, he then married and settled in England, where he studied Anthropology. Shortly before his engagement by the Otago Museum, Skinner completed his Masters in Anthropology at Cambridge. His research examined Māori and Moriori artifacts in

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155 McRobie, 59.
157 Brasch, 118. McRobie, 64.
British museums, work that established him as a recognised expert in Maori ethnology.\textsuperscript{159} Skinner had already been affiliated with the Otago Museum before the war, serving as acting curator in 1912, when Benham was on leave.\textsuperscript{160} Hence Skinner fitting Fels’ requirements and with a practical knowledge of the museum itself, was an obvious choice for the new curatorial position. Skinner’s importance as a leading figure in Maori anthropology can not be underestimated. During his time at the museum he increased the number of registered artifacts from one thousand to seventy thousand.\textsuperscript{161} Skinner wrote extensively on research based on the Museum collection, helping establish the Otago Museum’s international reputation.\textsuperscript{162} He was awarded the Percy Smith Medal in 1925, the Hector Medal in 1926, the Andrée Medal in 1936, and a C.B.E in 1956.\textsuperscript{163} In his own time Skinner was called “One of the best known and respected Anthropologists in the world” by Professor C.K.M. Kluckhohn of Harvard University.\textsuperscript{164} This reputation remains today.

In 1920, shortly after Skinner was employed by the Museum, Fels established a fund dedicated to the purchase of New Zealand and Polynesian ethnographic materials.\textsuperscript{165} As

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\textsuperscript{161} Blake-Palmer, 99.

\textsuperscript{162} McRobie, 217.


\textsuperscript{164} (Author Unknown) \textit{Otago Daily Times}, October 9 1952 quoted in McRobie, 211.

\end{flushleft}
with the funding of the curatorial position, this fund was made anonymously to the museum. The first purchase from this fund was four rare wooden Easter Island statues, three human figures and one lizard. The fund later became known as the Fels Fund and continues to contribute money to museum acquisitions today.

The first major act of patronage for which Fels took public credit was his generous donation of more than 2000 artifacts in 1924. This gift was largely made up of Māori ethnographical specimens and various weaponry, such as swords, daggers and firearms, from countries including India, Turkey, Indonesia and Sir Lanka. In 1925 Fels formed a committee of prominent Dunedin business men to fund the purchase of archeological specimens, an area of perceived weakness in the collection. The group became the Association of Friends of the Museum, an organization which plays a very active role in the Museum’s functioning to the present day. The additional acquisitions facilitated by this committee together with Fels’ donation stretched the museum’s ability to store and display its items.

The influx of new and exciting items and the lack of exhibition space for them led to only one logical conclusion: the museum needed an extension. Fels played an instrumental role in organizing a committee, comprised once again of prominent local citizens, to raise funds for a new wing. Construction of the extension began in 1928 and was financed

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by a government grant and £23,000 donated by local companies and individuals.\textsuperscript{169}

Named in honour of its most significant patron, the Willi Fels Wing opened in 1930 and became the chief gallery for display of ethnological material.

With Fels at the helm, the Otago Museum was rapidly transformed from "a one-man band" tied to the University's apron strings to a sophisticated civic institution worthy of pride. One important step in achieving this was the formation of a board of management independent from the University. The events leading up to the opening of the Otago Museum's new wing led to the formation of a board of management. The logic was that since funds were being provided by local businesses and individuals, the community should have a voice in how that money would be spent. Fels wrote an impassioned letter to the University Chancellor, speaking out about the role of the museum as a civic institution stating,

\begin{quote}
...the Museum is not only an Otago University institution but a civic one, not only offering a great attraction to the inhabitants of our town but to any visitors from New Zealand and abroad. Such a showplace as our Museum will be should deserve the full support of our civic authorities.\textsuperscript{170}
\end{quote}

The board, which became known as the Museum Committee, consisted of nine members, five from the University, three citizens and one member of the Dunedin City Council.\textsuperscript{171} Two more members, one from the Otago Institute and a representative of the Government were added later.\textsuperscript{172} On 17 October 1930 Fels became the Committee's first Chairman, a

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\textsuperscript{170} Fels to Chancellor Sidey, 3 August 1929, Otago University Council Correspondence Series 5/146 quoted in McRobie, 71.
\textsuperscript{171} McRobie, 69-70.
\textsuperscript{172} McRobie, 70-71.
\end{flushright}
position he thoroughly deserved and "...a triumph for his policy of redirecting the responsibility of the welfare of the museum back to the local community". Fels stook to gain the museum’s independence from the university. The Museum Committee was an important step in this battle, as it provided a forum for change and development controlled by a board of prominent citizens with varying local interest. The motives for this patronage must have had multiple aims. For the citizens, this was probably a mixture of civic boosterism and a desire to establish themselves as a worthy progressive elite by affiliating themselves with science, learning and culture. Through its association with these wealthy people the museum was able to procure funds that were simply beyond it previously, allowing for growth and development.

The Museum Committee’s initial area of control was financial; in particular, it governed the expenditure of the funds collected by the Friends and anything remaining after the construction of the new wing. Benham retired in 1937 giving the Committee a chance to extend its reach of influence to administration matters. With great gusto, Fels seized the opportunity to suggest H.D. Skinner as Benham’s replacement, complaining of delay after only two weeks. Skinner was made Director soon thereafter. This marked the beginning of one of the most fruitful eras in the museum’s history. Skinner and Fels

173 McRobie, 72.
174 McRobie, 72, 71.
176 McRobie, 75.
177 Fels to Chapman, 12 November 1936. Otago University Council Correspondence Series 5/253 quoted in McRobie, 75.
were a formidable team; dedicated to the Museum, they were both good friends as well as respected colleagues.\footnote{178}

One of Fels' last contributions was to initiate the extension of the museum. Shrewd in his methods Fels suggested the extension as part of the Dunedin City's centennial celebrations at a public meeting. His speech, delivered on 14 January 1940 stressed the importance of the museum as an educational resource and as an institution of civic pride. Fels advocated a new wing for the museum as a fitting gesture to celebrate the centennial, as any improvement to the museum would "...strengthen Otago's claim of being a cultural and educational centre."\footnote{179} The \textit{Otago Daily Times} quickly picked up the story. Public support was such that the University had to accept the proposal, although it would be some time until adequate funding had been gathered to start building.

In 1951 the University established the Museum Trust Board, which was given total responsibility for all running of the Museum independent of the University, official sanction of a situation which had existed for some time.\footnote{180} This was Fels' dream made reality, unfortunately five years after his death. The Centennial Wing was not opened until 1963. It now is home to the Pacific and Nature Galleries.

Over the more than 25 years of his involvement with the Otago Museum, Fels personally gave more than 80,000 items from his collection and donated amounts exceeding

\footnote{178} Skinner and his wife frequently dined at Manono.  
\footnote{179} Address 14 January 1940 'Address by Willi Fels titled 'Papers on Otago Museum & others to read to University Club 14.1.44' MS-0996-010/103. Hocken Collections. \footnote{180} McRobie, 82-83.
£250,000. Fels gave his collection to the museum in pieces. He began in 1924, donating an extensive collection of more than 2000 articles. The Museum's annual reports indicate that the gift consisted of 200 “oriental weapons”, including helmets, shields, daggers, swords, battle axes, and pistols from places such as Indonesia, Turkey, India, Sir Lanka, Afghanistan and Singapore. Fels also donated Maori and Oceanic material. The Oceanic gift included examples of everyday implements, such as simple fishhooks and adzes; it also included more ostensibly exotic items, such as necklaces made of teeth, fringed drums, and cannibal forks. Weaponry, especially in the form of clubs, was also represented in the Oceanic donation. The Maori materials were mostly items for ordinary use; the majority of the gift was comprised of tools, such as adzes, cutters, pickers, worked stone, bird spear points, and fishhooks. The items were made of diverse materials, with bone and greenstone occurring most frequently. All parts of New Zealand were represented in this collection, but much of the material came from local Otago beaches.

Fels' made his next major donation in 1935. It consisted of about one hundred bronze finger rings, fibulae and arrowheads from Italy and Greece. In 1938 Fels gave his stamp collection to the Museum. The stamps were Australian and European, dating from 1870 to 1910. The following year Fels gave a most generous gift of 5,400 coins, of which 1,500 were classical Greek and Roman examples. This collection also included a large number of Papal medals. The coins (excluding the Greek and Roman examples) are dated from the eighth century up to the modern era and originate from all around the

globe. This donation also included thirty books and catalogues on the subject of numismatics. In 1946, when Fels realized that his death was approaching, he organized the final transfer of items from his personal collection. These items, no doubt were his most treasured possessions. This last gift included three hundred pieces of early Wedgwood, eighty items of Japanese origin, fifty Tibetan articles, and other items. Fels’ donations to the Otago Museum had a momentous effect on the institution. The Museum was not however the only subject of Fels’ generosity. In 1946 Fels gave a collection of more than 400 rare books to the University of Otago Library. This Donation was hailed the as “One of the finest individual gifts received...” The donation included early printed manuscripts and incunabula as well as rare first editions of more modern authors. Fels’ gift filled significant gaps in the library’s collection; although the Shoults collection housed at Selwyn College had five medieval manuscripts the University had none. Fels’ donation would be overshadowed in later years by the impressive contribution made by his nephew Esmond de Beer. However, Esmond’s decision to invest money and gift his own collection to the University of Otago Library may not have eventuated without Fels’ example.

Fels was a generous man, of that there is no doubt. So what were his motives? And what were the rewards of patronizing an institution like the Otago Museum? It is likely that from the start of his association with the Otago Museum, Fels envisioned this institution as the final resting place for his personal collection. Initially, Fels probably intended his son Harold to inherit the collection, but after his son’s death in World War I, Fels’ had to consider other options. Bendix Hallenstein, Fels’ father-in-law, had already been a patron of the museum since 1893. One of Hallenstein’s most important donations was an ancient Egyptian mummy from Thebes dating to 1320-1200 BCE. Hallenstein’s association with the museum may have been a factor that encouraged Fels’ involvement.

Many scholars suggest that for collectors, what happens to their collection after their death can be a source of deep anxiety. Psychologically, the collector may view the collection as an extension of self; because of this deep attachment to the items, what happens to the collection is in a sense tied up with what happens to the collector. Should a collection be auctioned off to various anonymous bidders and the items be scattered to the wind, then the collector too is dispersed and disappears. The gifting of a collection to an established and permanent institution, such as a museum or library, is one way for the collector to be sure that their collection will remain intact, thus ensuring that their identity and memory will also persist. For Fels, with no direct male descendents to carry on the family name, giving his collection to the museum ensured a sort of immortality. Fels’ administrative work on behalf of the museum may thus be seen as a way of preparing the museum for the receipt of his collection.

Many Jews in New Zealand have made a significant impact on the people and institutions of this country through selfless donation of money, time and service. Fels, although he is unique in the size and nature of this contribution to Dunedin society, is not unique in making large gifts without much thought of reward. Other Jewish New Zealanders who were Fels' contemporaries made significant contributions through volunteer work, patronage or civic service; they include several city mayors, Prime Minister Sir Julius Vogel (1861-1869, a one-time Dunedin resident), and the doctor Sir Louis Barnett (1865-1946), who donated £8,000 the University of Otago Medical School. Among Fels' own circle of friends, the Theomin family were significant local Jewish patrons. David Theomin and his wife Marie were supporters of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery and patrons of Francis Hodgkins. Marie was also an active member of the early Plunket society. Their daughter Dorothy continued her parents' generosity and dedication to the arts; she served as president of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery from 1957 to 1959. 187

There are several possible reasons for the abundance of philanthropists among the Jewish people. Foremost, perhaps, is the fact that charity work is proscribed by the Jewish faith. One of the 613 commandments followed by Orthodox Jews refers directly to giving to the poor. The important thing to note is that the Jewish people see philanthropy as an obligation; giving is a duty, more than simply a voluntary act of generosity.188


for those less fortunate, the Jewish people exercise compassion one of the most human characteristics of God. \(^{189}\)

Aside from religious motivations, Jewish history provides further evidence as to why Jewish people do so much for their communities. The Jews have suffered horrendous persecution throughout history. They have been a displaced people wandering the world in exile, seeking the promised homeland since biblical times. As Robyn Notman suggests in regards to the philanthropic activities of Dora de Beer, Fels’ niece, the Jewish people may give so generously to the communities they settle in out of gratefulness for the peace they found there. \(^{190}\) Philanthropy may also be a way of making themselves indispensable to the community and a protective mechanism against further persecution.

Although Fels was not a strictly observant Jew, he would have grown up with the culture of giving all around him. It would have seemed natural to Fels with so many examples around him of charitable Jews, to turn his thoughts to the wider community when faced with deciding what was to do with his collection.

\(^{189}\) Patai, 528

\(^{190}\) Notman, “Dora de Beer,” 2.
Chapter 3: Fels’ Legacy

The philanthropy of Willi Fels has had far reaching consequences for art and culture not only in Dunedin but for all of New Zealand. The importance Fels placed on patronage of culture and his example of giving back to the community in a humble and modest way was an inspiration for younger family members. Fels's extended family is filled with figures who collected art of all kinds, donated money and items to museums and galleries, sponsored individual artists and cared deeply for the state of culture in New Zealand. Of particular note in this regard are Charles Brasch, Fels's grandson, Elespie Prior, his granddaughter and Esmond, Mary and Dora De Beer, nephew and nieces of Fels. Each of these individuals made an impact on cultural life in New Zealand.

In addition to these more renowned collectors, other family members and associates had an impact on the Dunedin cultural scene. For example, Fels's brother Alfred who loaned items to the Otago Museum for exhibition on at least one occasion.\textsuperscript{191} His wife's sister, Agnes Barden and her husband Siegfried Barden were also important collectors of art, medieval and Renaissance figurines and Asian pottery. Brasch remembers

\textit{...she had one or two seventeenth century Dutch sea-scapes of ships with wide bright sails against clouds glowing above still water, a beautiful head of a girl, jewel-like on a dark background German or Dutch of the same period, good examples of prints by Dürer and Rembrandt and others...}\textsuperscript{192}

Part of this collection was given to the Otago Museum. It is also interesting to note that Bendix Hallenstein, Fels's father-in-law, was related to David Theomin by marriage, and


\textsuperscript{192} Brasch, 133.
Fels would have known him socially. Theomin was a collector and his house Olveston and its contents were given to the people of Otago by Dorothy Theomin in 1966. Emil and Percy Halsted, sons of Bendix Hallenstein's brother, Michaelis, also donated works to the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in the 1930s and 1940s and have a gallery named after them. Fels worked at Hallenstein Bros with both gentlemen, particularly Emil, although they did not get on very well professionally.

Charles Brasch, the first grandson of Willi Fels, grew up to become the editor of the important New Zealand literary journal *Landfall* and a significant poet in his own right. Like his grandfather, Brasch was a quiet benefactor, anonymously setting up fellowship endowments at Otago University, and as passionate about New Zealand literature as Fels was about the Otago Museum. Charles Brasch and Willi Fels had a very special relationship. Brasch wrote "...I think I belonged especially to my grandfather...as the first-born of my generation, a man-child, the promise of the family." Brasch was the eldest child of Fels’s daughter Helene, who died when Brasch was very young. Brasch did not get on well with his father Hyam Brasch (later Henry Brash), and to some extent Fels filled the gap left by these unavailable parents. Hence, it is not surprising that Fels played such a prominent formative role on the young Brasch. The range of his influence varied -- from directly supporting Brasch in his decision to become a poet to cultivating a philosophy of philanthropy in the arts. Indeed, Fels and Brasch seem to have been similar.

194 *The Hallenstein Legacy*: 6.
195 Vickerman, 75.
196 Brasch, 5.
Brasch is most famous for his literary work, both as an editor and as a poet. Fels paid an important part in his grandson’s development in these areas. Fels collected books and was an avid reader. He enjoyed poetry as did his wife, Sara. She preferred Tennyson, Browning and Yeats, while Fels most enjoyed German poetry by Goethe and Schiller. There were often poetry readings at Manono of Dante, Browning and Whitman. Brasch recounts Fels reading him *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, although he did not particularly enjoy these classical works. Nevertheless, as Brasch grew older he came to greatly appreciate these formative events. The exposure to books at Manono was important for fostering Brasch’s interest in literature. Brasch’s enthusiasm for reading encouraged him to write for himself. Henry Brasch wanted his son to be a lawyer or to follow Fels into business at Hallenstein Brothers, but Brasch knew he wanted to be a poet. It was Fels who allowed Brasch to make a decision about his future and who performed the difficult task of telling Henry. Brasch deeply appreciated the support of his grandfather, stating, “He accepted me, finally, as I was. There was peace between us. There was no such peace between my father and me.” Fels’s support of Brasch’s writing sometimes took a more practical role. Fels offered constructive criticism on poems Brasch had sent him stating, “…very good select wording…But I recommend you

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197 Brasch, 15 and 113.
198 Brasch, 15.
199 Brasch, 113.
200 Brasch, 51.
to compose poems in a more cheerful tone...”\textsuperscript{201} In Fels’ matter of fact tones and honest response without flattery we can see something of the editor Brasch would become.

Brasch’s responses to authors submitting work to \textit{Landfall} had the same polite but to the point quality.\textsuperscript{202}

Brasch did not see himself as a collector like Fels was. Brasch admired items in Fels’ collection and even indicated a desire to possess them, but he himself did not have a general interest in collecting.\textsuperscript{203} Brasch did, however, become a collector of New Zealand art and books. Brasch’s book collection differed from Fels’ in that Brasch collected volumes which he used for his literary work, a research library rather than a collection for aesthetic or preservation reasons. Brasch’s books were to be read, “…not to admire for their age and rarity and preserve in cases.”\textsuperscript{204} In contrast, Brasch’s motivation for art collecting was quite similar to Fels’ pursuit of his collection. Fels hoped to enrich New Zealanders’ understanding of their country through the purchases of the Fels Fund. Brasch similarly turned to local inspiration, seeking to give New Zealand artists their deserved place in New Zealand art history. Brash developed a keen aesthetic eye. More importantly, he cultivated a philosophy that prized distinctively New Zealand

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\textsuperscript{201} Willi Fels to Charles Brasch, 6\textsuperscript{th} of February 1941. “Manono WF’ including letters from Willi Fels to his grandson.” 1941-1947. MS-0996-010/115. Charles Brasch Literary and Personal Papers (ARC-0124) Hocken Collections Uare Tāoka o Hākena.
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\textsuperscript{203} Brasch, 114.
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\textsuperscript{204} Brasch, 114.
\end{flushleft}
art. Brasch built up a private collection of local art and also turned his attention to the wider reception of art in New Zealand. He accomplished this in part by publishing critiques of New Zealand art galleries and their narrow collecting policies.

Brasch was also involved with the Otago Museum. He served as an elected member of the Museum Committee from 1948 until at least 1956. Brasch also donated items to the museum, such as the *Leaping Salmon Vase* by twentieth century British pottery Bernard Leach (F68.7 Otago Museum) and a silver and garnet necklace by New Zealand jewellery designer, Edith Morris (F54.32 Otago Museum). The first list of benefactors published in the Otago Museum Annual Report for 1957-1958 recognised Brasch’s contribution to the museum. His listing reads, “Continued and sustained interest in the welfare and development of the Museum.” Brasch’s interest in the museum was without doubt inspired by his grandfather.

Esmond de Beer and his sisters, Mary and Dora, inherited their uncle’s interest in the material production of different cultures, collecting, his generosity of spirit, and the desire to give back to the community through patronage of the arts. In contrast to Fels, the de Beers were more specifically engaged with fine arts and painting. Without being unfair to Fels’ connoisseurship and keen eye for beautiful pieces, the de Beers had a greater aesthetic sense and were less interested in the history found in the items they...

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206 Taylor, 53-54.

collected. The de Beer's were more modern in their tastes, while Fels' was more of an antiquarian. Their father, Isidore de Beer, was also an avid collector. While much of his children's interest in collecting and cultures from around the world may have come from the more direct influence of their father, several aspects may be attributed to Fels' unique influence.

Like Brasch, Esmond de Beer owed much of his early exposure to literature to Fels. He wrote in a letter, "We had a good number of books in my parents' house, and there were more in that of my uncle Willi Fels so that I was acquainted with a good range of nineteenth-century books." This proved to be incredibly important. Esmond's interest in literature became a life long dedication to scholarship on the works of John Evelyn and John Locke, for which he was highly acclaimed.

Fels legacy is felt strongest in the generosity and patronage that Esmond, Mary and Dora bestowed upon Dunedin culture institutions. Most of the gifts made were in the name of all three siblings, but in most cases it seems that Esmond was the instigator. Esmond's greatest contributions were to the Dunedin Public Art Gallery and the Otago University Library. Esmond compiled a report on the state of the collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 1963; his comments were insightful and proved influential, helping guide

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210 Notman, "Dora de Beer," 177.
the Gallery's collection policies. Esmond then targeted his collecting to fill the gaps he saw in the Art Gallery, donating relevant works as he came upon them. Among the works that he contributed to the collection over the years of his involvement with the institution are: Zanobi Machiavelli's *Madonna and Child* (c.1460), Claude Monet's *La Dèbâcle* (1880; donated in 1954), and Claude Loraine's *Landscape with Hagar and the Angel* (1564.; donated in 1958). In addition to these singular gifts, Esmond also made several large donations, such as a group of 172 art works, including a large group of Old Master prints and Japanese Woodblock prints, in 1982 and thirteen Turkish and Persian rugs in 1984. The Otago University Library also gained considerably from Esmond's patronage, both in books and monetary gifts. The most significant donations were made after the deaths of Mary (d. 1983) and Dora (d. 1982); during the 1980s books practically poured into the library. Their donation included guidebooks from the 1500s to 1820s, principally from Italy, and Esmond's collection of books and manuscripts by and about Evelyn and Locke. Esmond's impressive donations increased the Special Collections from 2000 volumes, to more than 10,000 and earned him an honorary doctorate from Otago University.

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211 Robyn Notman, "What influence did Esmond de Beer's philanthropy have on the development of the collections of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery: and in what ways does it compare and contrast with the influence of his philanthropy on the Otago Museum, the University of Otago Library and the Hocken Library?" (Post Graduate Diploma in Museum Studies, Massey University, Palmerston North, 1991): 8, 12-13.
212 Notman, “Esmond de Beer”: 11, 15, 16.
Fels' influence may have inspired Isidore de Beer to give much of his collection to the Otago Museum when the family moved to London in 1925. The collection consisted of almost 600 items, including weaponry, jewellery, clothing, and artefacts for ordinary use from such diverse places as Africa, Egypt, India, and the Pacific, including New Zealand, Indonesia and Malaysia. In 1963 Esmond anonymously established a trust fund to support research into the collection. Until this time the Otago Museum was without a corresponding journal as a forum to present research by the museum's staff, Esmond's donation inspired to fill this gap. Carrying on the family tradition of patronage of the Otago Museum, in 1969 Esmond, Dora and Mary donated their father's bead collection, which was celebrated for its impressive size and diversity. When Mary and Dora died Esmond again considered the museum as a repository for the items they had gathered over the years. The choice of the Otago Museum was deliberate. Esmond indicated that Bendix and Fels were the inspiration for their patronage of the Dunedin institution over any British museum, despite the fact that the family had resided in the United Kingdom for much longer than they had lived in New Zealand. Esmond donated some 270 pieces, including weapons, watches, metal ware and, most importantly, ceramics and Japanese material. Some of the items were souvenirs from holidays and came from a variety of locations, including Egypt, Africa, Tibet, Italy and Holland. The final gift was delivered in 1984 and included 75 textiles, with examples of embroidery, lacework

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216 Notman, "Dora de Beer": 21, 95.
217 Notman, "Dora de Beer": 177.
219 Notman, "Dora de Beer,": 181.
220 Notman, "Dora de Beer,": 181.
221 Notman, "Esmond de Beer,": 38-39.
and costumes, from all over the world.\footnote{222}{Notman, “Dora de Beer,”: 182.}

Of the three De Beer siblings it was Dora whose life bore the greatest similarity to that of her uncle. They were both keen outdoors people. Like Fels, Dora was also interested in anthropology and worked for the museum. Dora was also a close friend of Fels’s youngest daughter Kate.\footnote{223}{Notman, “Dora de Beer”: 26.} Due to this friendship she spent much time at Manono, where contact with Fels and his collection may have encouraged the development of her interest in anthropology. In 1919 Dora and Fels together attended the first anthropology extension course at Otago University, given by H.D. Skinner. Skinner’s appointment as Lecturer of Anthropology had been in no small part facilitated by Fels, who for five years paid part of Skinner’s salary. Dora became the first official student in Skinner’s anthropology course, which paid particular attention to New Zealand, Polynesian and Melanesian cultures. As part of the practical component of this course, she spent some time cataloguing the Chalmers Gift of Melanesian material to the Otago Museum.\footnote{224}{Notman, “Dora de Beer”:79-80.} On completion of the course Dora spent a year studying anthropology in Cambridge. Like her uncle, Dora also enjoyed hands on archaeological work and was involved in the excavations at Little Papanui Beach in 1929 that were organised by Skinner.\footnote{225}{Notman, “Dora de Beer”:97-98.}

Dora joined Fels on visits to dealers and museums. In 1923 she recorded in her diary that, “Uncle Willi and I went to several dealers, he bought a Mangaia paddle at one, and
several things at Whittakers, where I got 3 strings for Father." Seeing the formidable bargainer Fels at work would have been a good training for her later duties as a buyer for the museum. With the view of expanding the ceramic collection, Skinner first asked Dora to serve as a buying agent for the Otago Museum in 1947. Over the next few years he also requested her help in purchasing textiles and glass.\(^{227}\) In procuring the services of Dora, Skinner may have sought to keep the extended family of Fels involved in the Museum after his death in 1946. As his dedicated protégé, Dora served as a worthy stand-in for her uncle.

Elespie Prior was Fels's third granddaughter. Her parents were Arthur Forsyth and Emily Fels, the second eldest daughter of the Fels family. Emily separated from her husband early in Elespie's life, Arthur committed suicide when she was just fourteen.\(^{228}\) As he had done with Brasch, Fels became something of a father figure for Elespie, a status clearly indicated by the fact that he gave her away at her wedding to Ian Prior in 1946.\(^{229}\) This special gesture is made more poignant in the fact that Fels died later that year. Elespie recounted idyllic beach weekend holidays collecting Māori artefacts with her grandfather and Skinner, childhood recollections very similar to those of Brasch.\(^{230}\) This love of collecting stayed with her, and throughout their married life Ian and Elespie collected

\(^{226}\) Dora de Beer, Diary, 30 May 1923, Cambridge. de Beer Family: Papers (ARC – 0139) MS – 1392/022 Hocken Collections \textit{Uare Taoka o Hākena}  
\(^{227}\) Notman, “Dora de Beer”: 156.  
\(^{228}\) Ian Prior \textit{Elespie and Ian: Memoir of a Marriage} (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2006): 27.  
\(^{229}\) Prior, 16.  
\(^{230}\) Prior, 29 and Brasch, 18-19.
contemporary New Zealand art. Unlike the de Beers, they did not follow a particular collecting strategy informed by a desire to donate works to a public institution; their collecting was more private or personal in nature. As Ian Prior noted: "It was a matter of liking the paintings and subsequently buying them," and much of what they purchased was inspired by their friendships with the artists.231 The collection, which still exists, includes such paintings as Colin McCahon’s *Towards Auckland* (1953) and *Urewera Poster No.2* (1975), Evelyn Page’s *Luncheon Under the Ash Tree* (undated), Milan Mrkusich’s *In the Beginning (?)* and other works by Toss Wollaston, Ralph Hotere and Doris Lusk. Their collection recently toured New Zealand to much acclaim.232 The Priors also collected early books from New Zealand and the Pacific. In other ventures the couple patronized musicians, such as Anna and Madeleine Pierard, and Ian was a founding member of the Wellington Sculpture Trust in 1982. The pair also felt deeply the importance of actively contributing to society on a more political level, a philosophy which Fels as a supporter of the United Nations, would have shared. Ian, who is now in his late eighties, has taken a stance against environmental issues, such as nuclear testing in New Zealand and race relations. In response to the immigration policy of Muldoon’s government and the controversial dawn raids, he assisted in founding Amnesty Aroha in the 1970s.

Fels had a talent for encouraging others to give. His philanthropy was a lesson well learned by the younger members of his family. The inheritance of generosity and

231 Prior, 84.

dedication to the arts has had a lasting effect on New Zealand culture through the activities of Charles Brasch, Esmond, Dora, and Mary de Beer and Ian and Elespie Prior.
Conclusion

Willi Fels was Otago Museums greatest benefactor, and loyal patron. His amazing achievements as a collector have enriched the understanding of material culture of many who have walked through the museums door. Fels philanthropy has had ever increasing repercussions. The Willi Fels Memorial Trust is going strong; as are the various programs Fels instigated at the museum. Fels still is very much an active force. A corner gallery in the People of the World section in Otago Museum is dedicated exclusively to him and yet, he has not received the attention he deserves outside of the museum. This dissertation has hoped to fill in the gap in the scholarship of one of Dunedin’s prominent cultural figures. The rich archival resources have revealed a man who was many things. As a businessman Fels was shrewd and unsentimental. As a father, grandfather and friend, he was loyal and supportive. For the museum he was an innovative, dynamic and dedicated patron. Fels the collector was a connoisseur, an intellectual and romantic.
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**Articles**


**Websites**


Tables and Images

Otago Museum, Dunedin, New Zealand retains copyright of all images of their collections. Reproductions of images included in this thesis is not allowed without the permission of Otago Museum.
Above: Willi Fels c1890s.
Right: Willi Fels c1930s-1940s.
Hallenstein Family Group.
Standing (from left): Willi Fels, Agnes Hallenstein, Frank Hyams, Henrietta Hyams (née Hallenstein).
Seated (from left): Sara Fels (née Hallenstein), Bendix Hallenstein, Mary Hallenstein (née Mountain),
Emily de Beer (née Hallenstein) holding Mary de Beer. Children in front row (from left) Kate, Emily and Helene Fels. Hocken Library.
Burmese *dha* (D24.2240 Otago Museum)
Detail of blade ornamentation.
Drawn by Campbell Ryland.
Above: Yatagan (D24.2425 Otago Museum)
Right: Detail of hilt. Drawn by Campbell Ryland.
A selection of the daggers from the edge weapons display, People of the World, Otago Museum.
From Top: Turkey, (D24.27), Willi Fels Collection; Persia, (?), Willi Fels Collection; Probably Arab, (F82.146), ?; Persia, (D24.00), Willi Fels Collection; India, (D24.2668), Willi Fels Collection; Sir Lanka, (D24.2242), Willi Fels Collection; Sir Lanka, (D36.830), Fels Fund.
Tekoteko (D24.892) in the study storage case, Tangata Whenua gallery, Otago Museum.
Right: A Fels collection Māori adze (D24.1627 Otago Museum).
Below: A Fels collection Māori sinker (D24.115 Otago Museum).
Below Right: A Fels collection Māori chisel (D24.960 Otago Museum).
Right: Obsidian Dagger from the Admiralty Islands (D24.1890 Otago Museum).

Right: Massim Lime Spatula (D24.2186 Otago Museum)
Roman Coins from Fels Collection, Otago Museum. Three obverse and reverse; one reverse only.
Below Right: (F46.416).
Below Left: (F46.418).
Above: (F46.413). Right: Inrō (F46.408) and detail of netsuke. Below: (F46.409). All from the case of Japanese netsuke in the Fels Room, People of the World gallery, Otago Museum.
Two different views of a bone and turquoise Prayer Wheel (F43.91) from the Tibetan collection case in the Fels Room, People of the World Gallery, Otago Museum.
Above: Tibetan sculpture (F46.405).
Below: Gahu or Tibetan portable Amulet box with glass window showing painted stamped image in clay known as tsh-tsh (F46.110).
Below Right: Gahu (F46.111).
All from the Tibetan artifacts in the Fels Room, People of the World gallery, Otago Museum.

Left: Charles Brasch Brasch Papers, MS 996-12/64 Hocken Library.

Below: Mary, Esmond and Dora de Beer in the sitting room on the ground floor overlooking the rear garden, 31 Brompton Square, London. 27.01.1976. Photographer: Gary Blackman. Hocken Library.