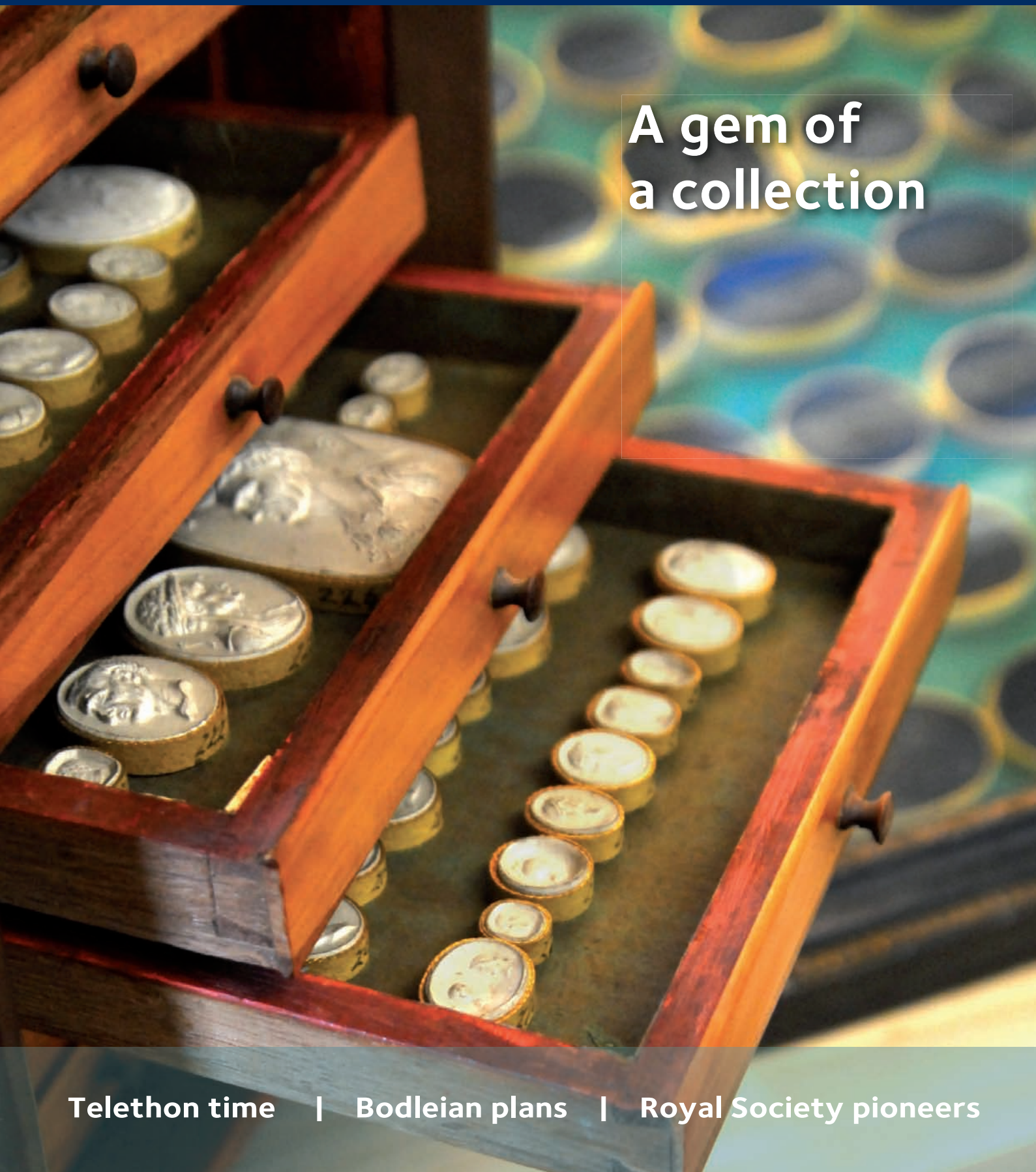# BLUEPRINT

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A gem of a collection

Telethon time | **Bodleian plans** | **Royal Society pioneers**

Classical art, anyone?

The University's Beazley Archive is both a treasure-house of antiquity and the inspiration for a sophisticated online resource, as *Sally Croft* discovers

Above: Plaster cast of part of the frieze from the west end of the Parthenon, and an antiquarian photograph of the Acropolis by Stillman. *Right*: Quartz gemstone from a private collection

Imagine taking a quick picture on your mobile phone of a piece of classical art, uploading it to a website and instantly being able to determine exactly what it is, where it originated, or where you can see similar examples. How about being able to see objects housed in museums worldwide, finding a timeline of styles, or being able to access instantly an expert dictionary explaining all the terms and references you're not familiar with? And imagine if you could one day be guided through the experience by a virtual intelligent 'Companion' who understands exactly what you're interested in, whether you're a classics scholar, student or tourist.

That vision is very nearly here – and it's a direct consequence of interdisciplinary research between the Humanities and the Mathematical and Physical Sciences Divisions, inspired by the Beazley Archive, part of the Faculty of Classics.

The Archive started life as the private collection of Sir John Beazley, the University's Lincoln Professor of Classical Archaeology and Art from 1925 to 1956. As a young academic, Beazley developed an interest in Greek decorated pottery and adapted art-historical methods of attributing specific 'hands' (i.e. styles) of anonymous and unknown artists and workshops. He also applied this method to the study of engraved gems. Gem engraving was a major art of classical antiquity. The hard, semi-precious stones were cut with intaglio figures and designs so that they could be set, usually in finger rings, and used as seals if pressed into wax or clay. Beazley's collection of impressions included around 800 pieces that once belonged to the 4th Duke of Marlborough; this collection was reconstructed by Professor Sir John Boardman in his 2009 book *The Marlborough Gems.*

Sir John and Lady Beazley's antiquities were given to the Ashmolean Museum in 1966, and his scholarly archive was purchased by the University. On his death in 1970, the archive landed on the desk of a young graduate student in the Faculty of Classics, Donna Kurtz. Determined to turn the material into a research resource for scholars and students, she set about raising money to do this. 'The collection has subsequently been enlarged through gift and purchase and today comprises around 500,000 notes, 250,000 photographs, 33,000 negatives, 7,000 colour prints, 2,000 books and catalogues and 50,000 gem impressions,' says Professor Kurtz, now Beazley Archivist and Professor of Classical Art. 'Scholars come from all round the world to look at our photos, documents and drawings and our unrivalled collection of gem impressions. Undergraduate and graduate students also join us, to handle material and learn alongside world experts.'

After nearly 40 years in the basement of the Ashmolean's Cast Gallery, the Beazley Archive was in 2007 transferred to the Classics Faculty's Ioannou School on St Giles. Its searchable databases and many programmes are available worldwide via **www.beazley.ox.ac.uk**, which receives about 250,000 hits a day. Since 1979 the Beazley Archive has led the field in bringing together museums and research centres across Europe in ICT initiatives. In 2002–5 it digitised *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum* for the Union Académique Internationale, showing 100,000 vases in more than 120 collections in 26 countries (**www.cvaonline.org**).

The Beazley Archive is also leading CLAROS (Classical Art Research Online Services), a partnership with institutions in Berlin, Paris, Basel and Cologne. CLAROS is using Semantic Web data integration technologies and state-of-the art image recognition algorithms to bring classical art to anyone, any time, anywhere, by collaborating with the departments of Engineering Science (on image recognition), Zoology (data web applications), the Oxford Internet Institute (artificial intelligence) and the Oxford e-Research Centre. A demonstration is available at **www.clarosnet. org** (click on 'screen cast demonstration') and the system is expected to be released to the public later this year.

A research centre of the Faculty of Classics, the Beazley Archive was one of the University collections jointly awarded a Queen's Anniversary Prize, which was presented last month at Buckingham Palace.