

White-ground kylix, ca 470 BCE, attributed to Euphronios. Delphi Archeological Museum 8140. PHOTO BY THOMAS SCHUMAN, USED BY PERMISSION.



THE ANCIENT WORLD IN THE DIGITAL AGE

PONDERING THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF THE HUMANITIES AND THE CLASSICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

Two and a half millennia ago, Socrates taught that the essence of true civilization is the examined life, inviting each of us to ponder the question: “What does it mean to be human?” The area of study known as “the humanities” focuses on this overarching question, exploring the human condition through languages, philosophy, religion, literature, and the arts. Study in the humanities has long been considered a way to hone one’s critical thinking; to gain personal knowledge for the sheer joy of it and for its value to others; and to probe, in the pursuit of justice and decency, the nature of ethical inquiry.

Nowhere are these endeavors more meaningful than in that area of the humanities known as “the classics,” an academic discipline that usually refers to the literatures and cultures of ancient Greece and Rome.

“The civilizations of the West have traditionally traced their roots to the achievements of these two ancient Mediterranean cultures,” notes John Kirby, chair of the Department of Classics at the University of Miami. “Their philosophies, their jurisprudence, their architectures and political structures, their notions of sport and entertainment, their monetary systems and scientific practices—all these cultural phenomena and many others have had a profound and lasting impact.”

“The classics have historically represented the epitome of ‘humanistic’ academic endeavor,” says UM Dean of Arts and Sciences Leonidas G. Bachas. “The study of the Greek and Roman classics was at the foundation of the university system in the Western world. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle believed in a well-rounded education that included reading, writing, physical education, arts, and music. The Roman Cicero, considered the father of the liberal arts, emphasized studies that integrated nature, mathematics, and the humanities. These classical Greek and Roman principles were central to education at the first European universities and to the New England model of universities established in the United States.”

Until a century and a half ago, study of the classics was the core of education and a gateway to success. But as new academic fields were born and students flocked to college to prepare for industries and specific careers rather than to acquire credentials for social mobility, the classics were pushed to the periphery.

Today, with ever-new areas of study and increased competition for a slice of the curricular pie, classics educators are challenged to show the

relevancy of their field. “If we cannot communicate the basics of the Greco-Roman world to a broad audience—Greek culture, Roman history, Greek and Roman mythology—if we cannot link the past to the present and make a case for the value of the ancient world, we will suffer and fail,” asserts Michael R. Halleran, a classics scholar and former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at UM.

Recognizing the importance of teaching *humanitas*, a Latin word used by Cicero to capture the qualities of being a good human, UM established its own Department of Classics in 2007.

Four years later, the young department joined with the Center for the Humanities on February 25, 2011 to host a symposium, “Humanities through Classics: What Does the Future Hold?” The event showcased the work of UM faculty and hosted classical scholars of international renown, including Halleran (now provost of the College of William and Mary), Shadi Bartsch (Ann L. and Lawrence B. Buitenen Professor of Classics at the University of Chicago), Gregory Nagy (Francis Jones Professor of Classical Greek Literature and professor of comparative literature at Harvard University), and Patrice Rankine (associate professor of classics and assistant head of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Purdue University). These guest speakers, as well as numerous University of Miami speakers, addressed a question of significance for UM, the academy, and society: In the new millennium, what is the role of the classics and the humanities in higher education?

Reflecting a symposium consensus, Halleran notes that the study of the classics is true to the core of a liberal arts education. Its purpose is not to equip a student for a career but rather for *any* career by teaching the skills that sharpen thinking, expand the imagination, lead to greater understanding of our humanism, and nurture the ability to engage in the world.

“The central question—What does it mean to be human?—is an enduring one, and it’s an exercise of profound and lasting value to test our own answer(s) against those that have been offered by the best and brightest thinkers of ancient times,” says UM Classics chair Kirby. “The similarities—and the differences—have an incalculable impact, and they equip us not only to live our own lives more richly but also to enrich the lives of our friends and families.”