

NACHLEBEN UND WISSENSCHAFTSGESCHICHTE

VINNIE NØRSKOV, *Greek Vases in New Contexts. The Collecting and Trading of Greek Vases – An Aspect of the Modern Reception of Antiquity*. Aarhus University Press, Aarhus 2002. 407 Seiten, 87 Abbildungen, 17 Tafeln, 3 Appendices.

The purpose of this interesting book is to explore the most recent developments in the tradition of collecting Greek vases, in order to examine how these changes have taken place. This study is based on the assumption that the change of the scholarly approach to Greek ceramics after World War II and the increasing focus on unauthorised excavation of archaeological sites have influenced the collecting and perception of Greek vases. Vinnie Nørskov hopes that her book contributes to the discussions on modern collecting and will be a basis for gaining a deeper understanding of the scale of it and the problems involved.

To show how modern treasure hunting and the looting of archaeological sites have their roots in the history of collecting and trading of Greek vases, the author devotes two chapters to historical aspects. Ancient ceramics were known in the 13th century and were kept in the Italian cabinets of curiosities of the 16th and 17th century. But in the 18th century painted vases, then thought to be Etruscan, were mentioned and published in scholarly books. Real vase collections were created now, as the col-

lection of Cardinal Gualtieri, left to the Vatican in 1728, and the Mastrilli-collection in Naples, seen by Winckelmann and in 1766 bought by Sir William Hamilton. Due to the influence of these two men the tradition of collecting Greek vases spread to the rest of Europe. The publication of the Hamilton-collection by d'Hancarville made them attractive collector's items. In 1828 the excavations of Vulci by Lucien Bonaparte, Prince of Canino, recovering more than 3000 Athenian vases caused a collecting fever all over Europe.

In the second half of the 19th century the methodology of archaeology developed and archaeological studies were introduced in the universities. The museums became research centres.

The growing collections demanded systematical publication and exhibition. A chronological sequence became the standard, urging a new kind of acquisition: to obtain a complete sequence museums wanted to fill 'holes' in their collections.

In the 20th century the study collection was an important innovation. Sherds that were not suitable for exhibition could be used in teaching and for study purposes. The studies concentrated on production centres and the individual vase painter. J. D. Beazley was able to distinguish many different painters and schools. In France iconological studies focused on the relationship between representation and reality moving from the producer of

the painting to the viewer. The same is seen in the studies on trade and distribution of the products.

Where art is collected there are art dealers. First the trade was limited to Italy, but later the royalty of Northern Europe started to collect, buying objects from Italian collections of impoverished heirs. In 1624 a decree was issued introducing license requirements for excavations and export of antiquities. Many laws followed, none of which was effective. Greek vases became an attractive souvenir for travellers and in Italy the prices increased. This was not the case in Northern Europe as Hamilton discovered when he tried to sell his second collection.

In Greece, where it had been easy to obtain a licence for excavations and export from the Turkish Sultan, things changed after the War of Independence. In 1834 the first law preventing random excavation and export of antiquities passed. In Turkey where the rules were generous for foreign excavators a new antiquities law prohibiting export was introduced in 1884.

In the 19th century commercial interests guided most of the excavations. A scholarly catalogue and an exhibition proved to be good marketing. There were many trained archaeologists working as art dealers in Rome, as Hartwig, Hauser and Pollak who did research in the field of attributions, maybe to increase the appreciation and the value of the vases. The price of the vases went up when America entered the market, but with the crash of the stock market in 1929 the antiquities market came to a low point, to recover only after World War II.

In the first half of the 20th century the protection of cultural heritage was considered a national problem. But after the war there was an internationalisation with the "The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict" of 1954 and the "UNESCO's Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property" of 1970. The prevention of the looting of archaeological sites is in the interest of everyone like the preservation of the environment. But in the meanwhile antiquities are seen as possession and investment, which is the reason that archaeological sites still are looted. There are four responsible parties: the source countries, who do not protect their sites, the dealers who buy objects from clandestine excavations, the collectors who create the market for unprovenanced objects and the scholars and museums who neglect the contextual value. All agree that looting is negative, but the archaeologists and source countries blame the trade and the collectors and make the regulations more severe, while the art dealers wish a more liberal policy, with a system of export licences.

The heart of the book is formed by eight case studies of museums with vase collections. Questions asked are how has the collecting of Greek vases been carried out during the last 50 years, what kind of objects have been collected, which criteria have been decisive for acquisitions and how are the vases presented to the public? The eight museums are the British Museum in London, the first public museum and the first museum that intro-

duced painted vases in Northern Europe, the National Museum of Copenhagen, which has its roots in a princely collection, the Metropolitan Museum of New York, which is one of the first and most important museums of the United States, the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, chosen as an example of a museum built up by industrialists, the Antiken Museum and the Sammlung Ludwig in Basel, founded after World War II, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the earliest University collection and important because of the influence of J. D. Beazley, the Antikensammlung in Kiel, founded when classical archaeology was introduced as an independent study, and the Duke Classical Collection in Durham, North Carolina, a small collection founded after World War II. The analysis of the collections is based on the registration of all vases acquired by the respective collections, with special attention for the post-war acquisitions. Interviews with the curators (Appendix A) give also important information on this subject.

The author also gives a short introduction in the history of each museum and its way to exhibit the objects. This is not the place to give all the details, but in general there is a development from an exhibition based on material to a chronological exhibition, sometimes within a geographical frame. Research done on a particular group of objects could upgrade it and cause the creation of a special room devoted to this subject.

That the historical and cultural contexts of the objects become more important after 1970 is also seen in the fact that the vases were often shown in a thematic exhibition, which offers a reconstruction of a context. This attention for the context and provenance had also influence on the acquisition policy. The directors and curators had great influence on the acquisition and the exhibition of the objects. Some were very keen on the legal provenance of the pieces, while others had fewer problems with the art market.

In chapter 5, "A look at the market", the author gives a survey of the most important dealers and auction houses followed by an analysis of vases put up for sale on the antiquities market from 1954 to 1998, based on 596 catalogues from auction houses and antiquities dealers in Europe and the United States. More than 18.000 painted Greek vases from the Geometric to the Hellenistic period (excluding prehistoric, Cypriot, black-glazed and bucchero ware) are registered. The statistics show a continuous increase in the supply of vases, with the 1980s as the most intensive period and a marked reduction in the number of vases offered in the 1990s. All vases with a reference to earlier owners (with names or anonymous), to publications or to a possible find spot, have been grouped under the category 'provenanced', the rest was grouped under the category 'unprovenanced'. Until the 1990s 80–90% of the vases was without provenance, after 1991 the percentage became 50%.

In the 1990s the Gulf crisis and the lack of important objects had their influence on the market. Smaller, less important pieces remained unsold, while the top

pieces, seen as an investment, were sold for high prices. Rarity, quality of drawing, provenance, attribution and preservation were the most important criteria for top prices.

The conclusion of the book is that the tradition of collecting Greek vases had been closely connected to the changes in scholarly interests and approaches. The curator will always try to improve and enlarge the collection of the museum by acquisitions and loans and his choice based on his scholarly interest is the most important factor.

Private collections are often the foundation on which museum collections are built. In that case the collector made the selection (although sometimes with the intention to give the object to the museum and guided by the museum staff). There are many reasons why people collect Greek vases, but mostly they do it for the originality and the quality of the shape and decoration. From the 1970s the curator's choice began to differ from the collector's choice. The interest in the archaeological context and provenance in combination with financial problems led to a decrease of acquisitions and sometimes to the development of an acquisition policy. Most curators are members of ICOM and observe the ethical rules set up by it. Especially when a curator is active in excavation projects he is keen on a find context and legal provenance. So here too the scholarly activity of the curator is decisive.

After World War II it took more than ten years before museums started to change their displays. The museums became more public-orientated. First they reduced the number of exhibited objects, making primary and secondary rooms. In the primary rooms the general public could admire the highlights, while the professional had admittance to the rest of the collection in the secondary rooms. Later the thematic displays offered more information on special subjects to the visitor.

Therefore the museums are changing their policy in acquisition and exhibition. But for the private collectors the historical context of an object is still less important than its aesthetic value, except that objects with a provenance are more expensive. Maybe the 'cult of the original' is coming to an end. There is already more interest in the old cast collections and copies of Greek vases.

The book ends with three appendices. In Appendix A you will find the interviews with the curators of the museums which are treated. They give a nice inside view in

the work of a curator in different types of museums. Appendix B and C consist of tables with the numbers and percentages of vases on the market and a list of the 172 most expensive vases sold.

This book is a highly interesting study and should be read by anyone dealing with collecting Greek vases, private collectors and especially museum curators.

For museum curators it is enlightening to compare the history of their own museum with the general tendencies described in this book. It makes one conscious of the powers that influenced the acquisition and the exhibition of the objects. In the case of 'my' museum, the Allard Pierson Museum, the archaeological Museum of the University of Amsterdam, I recognised many resemblances. One little point: the museum has been founded in 1934, when the collection of Museum Scheurleer in The Hague was bought by the Allard Pierson Foundation and given to the University of Amsterdam, and not in 1921 (p. 204, Table 11).

The tables with numbers and percentages of vases on the market give food for reflection. Although the number of unprovenanced vases has been diminished, it is still the greater part. And for many provenanced vases the only provenance is the name of the former owner, which says nothing on the archaeological context. Most museums keep themselves to the ICOM rules or their own acquisition policy when they buy objects, but for private collectors the aesthetic value is more important, so most of the objects on the market will go to private collections. More severe rules for the art market will not prevent the trade of illegal excavated objects as history has pointed out.

Creating a better understanding with the private collectors for the importance of the archaeological context will be the first and most important step. Therefore private collectors should read this book also. But, learning from this book that through the ages the scholarly approach to Greek ceramics has influenced the collecting, maybe the museums and curators also have work to do here, not only by giving the good example by developing a strict acquisition policy for themselves and their benefactors, but also by organizing exhibitions which give full attention to the archaeological and historical context of the objects to make the public conscious of the importance of it.

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