

International conference “Collecting Antiquities from the Middle Ages to the End of the Nineteenth Century”, Wrocław, Poland, 25–26 March 2021

In March 2020, The Institute of Art History and the University of Wrocław Museum were ready to receive a large group of international scholars looking forward to meeting and exchanging the latest state of their research on collecting antiquities. But, unfortunately, shortly before the conference, the world closed down because of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. At first, the organizers postponed, but the hope of meeting decreased as the pandemic spread, and the conference eventually went virtual. However, thanks to the excellent organization by Professor Agata Kubala 23 scholars from 9 countries had a very successful meeting online in March 2021.

Collecting antiquities has a long history, with the Roman elite as the first significant collectors in Europe. The idea of the conference was to capture the pan-European phenomenon of collecting antiquities, its multifacetedness and development over centuries. Since the Middle Ages, antiquities have been present in collections, and they have been carriers of specific ideas materializing diverse motivations by the collectors, being it individuals or institutions.

The opening lecture by professor Michał Mencfel discussed private collections of antiquities in Silesia. It gave a fantastic insight into the collecting environment in an area with many collectors who also developed theoretical thoughts on the nature and role of collections. He emphasized how certain societal conditions were essential for nurturing the ground for this sophisticated development in the region, such as an abun-

dance of materials and finds, international contacts, peace in the areas and a particular religious impulse. The paper gave a profound background for the conference papers, both in the presentation of collecting practices and in underlining the engagement with the objects by these scholars and the knowledge they sought in handling them.

Many papers focused on one collector or collection, discussing the exciting and often complex collecting processes. For example, Hans Rupprecht Goette investigated the collection of Sir Charles Nicholson, looking at the fate of ancient sculptures from the collection and reconstructing their origin. Several objects that were considered lost in a fire in 1899 have recently turned up when clearing out a stable in Porter's manor in Southend-on-Sea where Nicholson had lived.

Several papers presented collections from Polish and Lithuanian aristocrats. Magdalena Palica took up the recent history of the region, discussing questions of selective historical amnesia in post-war Europe and how the changes after 1989 have reshaped European memory studies, including new interest and studies in collections. Dorothea Gorzelany-Nowak showed the fascinating story of the antiquities collection of Prince Władysław Czartoryski that was not included in the reopening of the museum in the 1990s and has been kept in the storerooms until a new exhibition will open in 2021 in the Czartoryski Museum. The university collection in Wrocław was presented by Urszula Bończuk-Dawidziuk, giving us a small inside into what we would have seen in real life if the conference could have taken place in Wrocław.



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Aistė Paliušytė’s paper investigated the collection of the Radziwiłł, bringing it to life through her studies of descriptions and inventories. Even if very little is known about the origin of the objects, it clearly showed the importance of international interactions among the nobilities.

This network of collectors and scholars was also evident in the paper by Bodil Bundgaard Rasmussen on the collection of the architect Christian Hansen and Agata Kubala’s paper on Eduard Schaubert – both of them in Athens in the 1830s and 1840s and involved in restorations and rebuilding the new Greek capital. Their collections came directly from excavations in Greece, even if we often have little knowledge of the exact find spot.

Provenance studies

Tracking the history of single objects has gained increasing importance as provenance studies have grown as part of general interest in under-

standing collecting processes with a critical perspective of post-colonialism, gender issues and illicit trade. It also enables reconnecting collections to the archaeology of sites.

The studies contribute to the understanding of intellectual, political, social and economic history through the ages, but they also provide us with new archaeological knowledge of the past. That antiquities in collections originates from the ground is, of course, no surprise. What can be surprising is the lack of interest in this origin by collectors over time. The papers in this conference demonstrated a turn in focus from the motivations and contextualization of the collector to practices of collecting, origin and recontextualization of objects. The role of excavations, the legal excavation and the unauthorized or clandestine excavations – Ruurd Halbertsma defined them as archaeological or not archaeological – in the shaping of collections was thus an essential focus in many contributions.



The virtual conference environment was excellently managed by Agata Kubala – here showing Massimo Cultraro, Vinnie Nørskov, Serena d'Amico and Luca Salvatelli at one of the sessions.

The paper of Elena Santagati gave a detailed analysis of this in her case study on ancient Akrai, studied since the 16th century but excavated by Baron Judica. His life and collection were intrinsically bound to this site. Also Massimo Cultraro's account on the exploration and collection of prehistory in Sicily, and Serena D'Amico's work showed very illustratively the importance of the collection histories in reconstructing – or least trying to reconstruct – the archaeological context.

Excavating the archive

What is clear is the increased interest in archives in the last decades. The paper by Annarita Martini on the Mithraic relief now in the Louvre was an excellent example of how these archival studies can enable recontextualization. The relief came to the Louvre as part of the Borghese collection acquired by Napoleon. Still, Martini connects it to renaissance descriptions and illustrations of a Mithraeum on the Capitoline Hill. Even if the exact site is not secure, this connects the relief to an essential sanctuary in the heart of Rome.

Also, the actual physical archives in museums and private collections are still treasures of new

knowledge. This was shown by Luca Salvatelli, who presented an until recently unknown manuscript in the collection of the archbishop of Viterbo, describing the appearance of the Halo comet in 1066.

The digitalization has made several archives available across time. This was exploited by Zoltán Suba, who discussed the collection of the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. He investigated the impact of Thorvaldsen's collection of antiquities and casts in Thorvaldsen's work but especially also in the work of his apprentice István Freczy.

Object histories often need consultation of many archives. Ruurd Halbertsma illustrated this in his discussion of objects in the Leiden National Museum of Antiquities. He emphasized the need for an international perspective, including archives from three different countries and some private collections, to establish the object histories that enable us to understand the processes of collecting.

The role of academic or scientific interest was also a vital thread in the papers. For example, the paper by Paweł Gołyźniak discussed the famous

Philipp von Stosch’s collection of gems published by Johann Joachim Winckelmann. He focused on the many drawings of the vast collection, arguing that the bad reputation Stosch had acquired over the centuries was unfair and that he had, in fact, been deeply involved in making an academic presentation of his collection.

The manipulation of objects and collections

The market for antiquities nurtured by collectors was discussed in my own paper on market manipulations of “collections” from dealers, making them more attractive to buyers when appearing as collections. The paper by Eliška Petřeková on Franz von Koller’s wish for copies of exceptional objects illustrated through an exciting case of a bronze tripod how copies could fulfil the desire for certain objects that were not obtainable. The same is case in the production of Dactyliothe-ca, collections of gem casts, discussed by Paweł Gołyźniak in his second paper on the collection of Constantine Schmidt-Ciążyński who was a restorer and a dealer and gem collector. The paper by Giulia Moretti Cursi investigated two Dionysian reliefs in the Cardelli Collection effectively showing how conservation practices were transforming and manipulating objects to fit specific needs such as providing collectors with the attributes necessary for social ascent. The paper by Gaius

Stern presented the history of the appearance of reliefs from Ara Pacis, illustrating how reliefs from other monuments had been included in the reconstruction of the peace alter based on collection histories rather than in-depth studies of the objects themselves.

Thus, the conference gave a fascinating insight into a variety of collections and new methodological approaches to reconstructing and recontextualising histories of objects and collections.

Słowa kluczowe

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Summary

VINNIE NORSKOV (Aarhus University) / International conference “Collecting Antiquities from the Middle Ages to the End of the Nineteenth Century”, Wrocław, Poland, 25–26 March 2021

The paper is a summary of an international conference on collecting that was held virtually in March 2021. It gives a short overview of the papers presenting a variety of collectors and their motivations and dealing with new approaches and methods in recontextualizing objects and collections.