

# *Classics transformed? Ancient figured vases as a test-case for the preoccupations of classical reception studies*

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## Classics transformed? Ancient figured vases as a test-case for the preoccupations of classical reception studies

Katherine Harloe

The papers collected in this special issue explore a lesser-known fork in the path taken by the northern European reception of ancient Greek and South Italian vases over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The road better-travelled follows their unearthing in increasing quantities, especially in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and their appreciation and promotion by elite connoisseurs like William Hamilton and antiquarians such as Caylus, Passeri, and Winckelmann, whose labours of collecting and scholarship paved the way for the reception of ancient figured vases as fine art objects, testament to the superlative skill of Greek artists in *disegno* and worthy of display in private cabinets and public museums.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, such Enlightened interest in vases (which appeared for the most part as new and fresh as the recently excavated frescoes of Herculaneum to eighteenth-century audiences) opened an alternative route. Unlike ancient paintings, which (if indeed they survived excavation) faded quickly and often remained jealously guarded, the vases unearthed in southern Italy swiftly attained a wider dissemination; their portability, relative technical simplicity, and evident suitability as objects of domestic *use* as well as auxiliary elements in the decorative scheme of the gentlemen's library invited attempts at reproducing and adapting them in cheap materials using new methods of industrial production.

The success of Josiah Wedgwood, Samuel Alcock and other entrepreneurs in translating classical vases into batch-produced, industrially manufactured ceramics left a deep mark in British culture, even if tastes have changed and the days of mass-manufacturing in The Potteries are gone. Wedgwood's blue-and-white jasperware is instantly recognisable and rich in nostalgic connotation even, I would wager, for many people who are entirely unfamiliar with the Portland Vase. Its attention to the processes of production, marketing, and consumption of classical vases in reproduction enables this special issue to range well beyond the familiar story of the appeal of Greek vases to elite taste. If evidence of the purchase and enjoyment of neoclassical vases by working people remains hard (though, as Lewis and Morgan's papers here show, not impossible) to uncover, it is clear that the factories of Wedgwood and Spode, Alcock and Dillwyn employed hundreds of men, women

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<sup>1</sup> See *inter alia* Lyons 1992, 1997; Nørskov 2002; Smith 2018; C. Meyer in this special issue.

and children, often possessed of little to no formal education, in the manual labour of working and shaping the clay, copying patterns and filling in colours (Hall, Petsalis-Diomidis). Such labour, carried out at varying levels of skill, generated a deep familiarity with the motifs, shapes and iconography of classical vases. Consideration of design and marketing strategies also opens up new questions about the appeal of classical shapes, iconography and ornament to a realm of middling and petty-bourgeois respectability in a manner that contrasts markedly with the neo-pagan, libertine sensibility ascribed to the Dilettanti.<sup>2</sup> Thus, as Morgan uncovers in her paper, an eras, read as a cherub, might allow a vase of pagan subject-matter to find its way into a respectable Dissenting home; while with a little artful rearrangement a scene of mythical rape was converted into a family picnic.<sup>3</sup> Such accommodations of classical material to nineteenth-century standards of piety and domesticity are no less worthy of attention than the antics of the Monks of Medmenham Abbey.

In its focus upon the involvement of middle- and working-class Britons in the production and consumption of classical knowledge and forms, this special issue belongs with recent works that have examined nineteenth- and twentieth-century middling and working-class engagements with antiquity in various media. It could profitably be set in dialogue with recent studies of transformations of classical myth and history on commercial theatre stages (Bryant Davies 2018, Easterbrook 2019), of popular and commercial publishing (Thornton 2018), comics (Kovacs and Marshall 2011), children's literature (Murnaghan and Roberts 2018), radio programmes (Wrigley 2015), and museums and other visitor attractions from a social- as well as a cultural-historical point of view (Nichols 2015; Baker 2019). Like the studies just mentioned, the papers collected here illustrate the range of sources and methodologies that may profitably be applied to the recovery and analysis of responses to classical material beyond educational and social elites. Day books, employment registers, correspondence archives, instructional manuals, diaries, and newspaper advertisements offer, to researchers able to access and patient enough to mine them, rich information about the *actual*, as opposed to merely *implied* or *ideal* receivers of classical vases in reproduction, as well as the processes of their creation.<sup>4</sup> The four papers collected in Section One (Hall, Petsalis-Diomidis, Morgan, Lewis) all illustrate the rich micro-

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<sup>2</sup> Redford 2008; Kelly 2009.

<sup>3</sup> J. Morgan in this special issue.

<sup>4</sup> For a reflection on the richness of such archives and a provocative argument about the tendency of classical reception studies to overlook them: a tendency she attributes in part to an elitism inherent in the influential methodologies of Jauss and Iser, see Wrigley 2015: 17–35.

historiography that such sources can yield; Morgan's additionally demonstrates how archival research can overturn traditional, often self-serving, narratives of invention and philanthropy offered in autobiographical narratives and other authorised sources. Petsalis-Diomidis' discussion of Sarah Wedgwood exemplifies what recent monographs by Kate Hill (2016) and Amara Thornton (2018) have also demonstrated: that the study of unpublished sources, archives and correspondence is crucial to arrive at an adequate reconstruction of women's contributions to British commercial, intellectual and cultural life in eras when gendered social expectations placed them in informal or ancillary roles in commercial enterprises and public institutions, performing work that has left little trace in official or public-facing documentation such as registers of company officers, advertisements and newspaper reports. Hall's, Petsalis-Diomidis', and Morgan's papers all demonstrate the potential of archives to illuminate the role of women and other subaltern actors in design and production processes – though it is sobering to note Morgan's conclusion that nineteenth-century journalist William Turner's account of the role of Bessie Dillwyn as the chief designer of Dillwyn's Etruscan Ware cannot be substantiated.

Further collaboration between classical archaeologists and social and economic historians of later periods will indeed be necessary if these spotlight studies are to be developed into macro-analyses. As Lewis emphasises, our picture of the economics of the pottery industry is far from complete; more research is needed into the sale market for manufactures (as opposed to the fine arts) and into 'the movement between factories, retailers and customers' in order to flesh out even such plausible speculations as Morgan's account of the Dillwyn enterprise's failure. Although pots might seem the epitome of a tangible object, the material record too has its gaps: the study of industrially produced classicising ceramics faces its challenges. How ephemeral, relative to their prized ancestors, were these cheap wares, the acquisition of which may have been accompanied by little fanfare, which may have broken in use and been discarded, disposed of by legatees or even the first owners, when fashions changed? Examples of Wedgwood's famous jasperware are plentiful in museums of both fine and decorative arts. As Lewis notes, the same cannot be said of Dillwyn's wares or even many Alcock vases.

The contributions in Section Two return us to territory more familiar within classical archaeology and classical reception studies, moving as they do from reproductions to 'originals', from the factories of Staffordshire and Swansea to the socially authorised, aesthetic and scholarly spaces of the gentleman's library and the public museum. Their focus upon the actual and anticipated activities of non-elite actors enables the contributors to

perturb standard accounts of the norms that governed and constrained access to and engagement with classical vases in these spaces. While Meyer provides a new account of the genesis of the now all-but-ubiquitous, ‘vitrinized’ display cases of the public museum in nineteenth-century concerns about how to display potentially unsuitable material to the uneducated visitor, Slaney and Baker provide two examples – one from the eighteenth and one from the nineteenth century – of what appear in the perspective of this special issue as refusals to conform to norms of elite, educated and masculine *sophrosyne* that were then being established for the proper ‘enjoyment’ of curated classical material. Meyer places classical vases at the centre of debates around the purpose and contents of the public museum, a cultural institution which – as Slaney and Baker also emphasise – was freighted with class-related aspiration and anxiety. Directors, philanthropists and curators hoped to mould museums into places of intellectual and social betterment for women and the lower classes. But the museum could also be a space of moral hazard, particularly when it came to displaying pagan and licentious material of the kind found on many classical vases. Emma Hamilton’s unabashed appropriations of vases as theatrical props, and Maria Millington-Lathbury’s clothing of classical statues in tailor’s calico offer examples of confident and creative engagements that attracted contemporary derision on account of their unruly contrast with the disciplined, increasingly visually focused approaches licensed among archaeological specialists, but Slaney and Baker re-describe positively as grounded in tacit, experiential knowledge of the everyday affordances of cloth and vessel. The comparison between Hamilton and the peripatetic women lecturers that Baker examines throws up a further parallel: the ‘women’s work’ they performed, like the embodied and experiential knowledge of the Stoke pottery workers, was devalued in its own day, passed beneath the regard of much contemporary commentary, and has now left only indirect traces. Jane Harrison’s museum lectures, no text of which survives, are performances almost as ephemeral as Hamilton’s unreproducible ‘Attitudes’.

Ephemeral but, as the papers demonstrate, such receptions are not irrecoverable. While it is certainly to be hoped that Petsalis-Diomidis’ closing call for partnerships between classical archaeologists and nineteenth-century cultural, social and economic historians will be heeded, these essays also show that such collaboration will be far from a one-way street. Several contributors deploy with evident profit phenomenological, haptic and sensory approaches that are now fairly well embedded in archaeology and material culture studies but only now beginning to be discovered by social historians. Hall’s optimism that the relative scarcity of first-person accounts by pottery workers (though perhaps even here more archival

material awaits discovery) need not prevent us from forming a picture of their world appears justified; this special issue also shows that it need not be limited by the availability of written sources, nor by treating material objects – as even some traditions of archaeological scholarship have tended to do – by analogy with written texts.<sup>5</sup> Formal education, presupposing literacy, was not the only means by which knowledge of classical myth and ancient history, let alone classical form and iconography, circulated among the middling and working classes: if Emma Hamilton received her classical education in Drury Lane and Covent Garden,<sup>6</sup> Wedgwood's biography also testifies to the capacity of men and women with little formal classical knowledge to be seized by and engage in sustained fashion with classical vases. This engagement is also evident in the work of a number of contemporary artists in our own day such as the Scottish ceramicist, Jessica Harrison or the 2003 Turner Prize-winner, Grayson Perry.<sup>7</sup>

As much or more than their classical prototypes, then, classical vases in reproduction turn out to be 'boundary objects' (Baker), caught between aesthetic and scholarly hierarchies of fine art, decorative function [?], and (merely) local interest. It is precisely this marginal status of the vase that has enabled the contributors to this special issue to identify and challenge some notable blind-spots in classical reception studies' visual field. In her introduction, Petsalis-Diomidis locates this special issue alongside a profusion of work produced in classical reception studies over the past decade that has been characterised as a 'democratic' or 'popular' turn.<sup>8</sup> But she also argues that research on the reception of ancient material culture – which, she notes, has in any case lagged behind the literary and performance studies that gave much of the initial impetus to Anglophone reception studies in the 1990s – has been slow to move beyond elite tastes, and the 'high' genres of painting and sculpture, because of an inherited value scheme that ranks 'art' above 'craft' (and, one may

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion of pertinent aspects of this so-called 'material affective turn' see Yalouri 2014, and for a reflection on its potential to address traditions of classical scholarship and connoisseurship that have tended to privilege the 'immaterial' aspects even of material objects, Yalouri 2018.

<sup>6</sup> On Hamilton's earlier life and work see, in addition to H. Slaney in this special issue Pop 2011, Contogouris 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison's ongoing series, 'Untitled (Things)', recreates in Parian porcelain vases catalogued in the Victoria and Albert Museum's ceramics collection, including Wedgwood jasperware. For images see <http://www.jessicaharrison.co.uk/page6.htm> (accessed 17.01.2020). Among the works Perry created for the 2011 exhibition he curated at the British Museum were a number of glazed ceramics that reference classical shapes and colour while, like the exhibition as a whole and his contemporaneous television series, 'All in the Best Possible Taste' (2012), engaging critically with the class connotations of classicism, fine and decorative arts, and the museum. See in particular his figured vases 'Grumpy Old God' (2010) 'The Rosetta Vase' (2011) and 'The Frivolous Now' (2011), all illustrated in Perry 2011: 95, 97, 98, 100–01, 137–38.

<sup>8</sup> Hardwick and Harrison 2013; my own contribution to the volume, now almost a decade old, was a plea for further critical reflection upon the claims implicit in the terminology of 'democratisation'.

expect, artisanal handcraft above industrial production). Upon reading this I was reminded of Marco Formisano's observations, in the introduction to another recent collection, on classical reception studies' tendency to reinforce those dynamics of canonicity and marginality, significance and insignificance that have 'marked the field of classics since its very origins as *Altertumswissenschaft* in the late eighteenth century'.<sup>9</sup> If one path taken by classical vases after the eighteenth century led to the glass vitrines of the British Museum, the other – the one pursued in this special issue – is certainly the road less travelled. Yet it is precisely by focussing on classical materials creatively reproduced and adapted by agents and for audiences less beholden to the tyranny of the elite and learned focus upon the authentic singular that this special issue has brought to light a series of engagements and actors far beyond the collectors, antiquarians and entrepreneurs, the William Hamiltons and even the Josiah Wedgwoods.

Finally, however, the papers in this special issue seem to me, when read together, to attest to the enmeshing and interpenetration the worlds of upper and middling classes, elite and (supposedly) unlearned. Meyer builds an argument about how, once women and the 'lower' classes were given access to classical vases, the characteristics imputed to these untraditional audiences generated concerns around the proprieties of display that eventually gave rise to glass vitrines. If such exhibition strategies sealed off objects from haptic engagement and use, this was compensated for, and in many cases funded by, consumption in mass reproduction. The symbiosis of commercial and aesthetic interests, elite and popular concerns, continues to underpin the worlds of research and engagement, scholarship and private collecting, the art world and the public museum, today. This BICS special issue goes to press just as the British Museum's winter 2019/20 'blockbuster' exhibition, 'Troy: Myth and Reality', is entering its third and final month. This exhibition, which takes a narrative approach in its early sections, is notable for the extensive use it makes of classical figured vases in order to present the Troy story to the general public: a mode of visual storytelling that – possibly unintentionally – echoes Jane Harrison's strategy in her *Myths of the Odyssey in Art and Literature*.<sup>10</sup> While the exhibition's main poster-boy is Albacini's 1825 sculpture of the wounded Achilles, on loan from the sculpture galleries at Chatsworth and thus a potent symbol of elite neoclassical taste, another highlight object is Exekias's famous black-figure

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<sup>9</sup> Formisano and Kraus 2018: 2.

<sup>10</sup> A. Baker in this special issue. The exhibition is also relevant to the themes of this special issue because it presents a selection of Schliemann's Trojan finds: the first time that this material has been exhibited in Britain since the famous South Kensington exhibitions of the 1870s to which A. Baker alludes and which she discusses more fully in her 2019 monograph.



amphora of Achilles slaying Penthesilea. This vase, from the Museum's permanent collections, is presented out of narrative sequence behind glass, attended with the panoply of directional lighting that obscures all views except the frontal and befits an acclaimed masterpiece of ancient art. But the ordinary visitor can enjoy it again – should she so wish, even come to possess it – in the Museum's gift shop, where it is displayed for her pleasure and purchase in multifarious, mechanically reproduced forms.

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