

Warwick Vase (13-21)



Warwick Vase on Pedestal
Wilton-Ely No. 889
30.75 x 21.75 inches, overall
28 x 18.75 inches, plate mark

Print by Piranesi depicting the mammoth 10-foot Warwick Vase, created in ancient Rome, which was uncovered from the bottom of Lake Tivoli, near Hadrian's Villa in 1770. The vase features classical bacchal masks and associated emblems such as a pine-cone tip staff known as a thysrus, together with classical leaves and intertwined naturalistic handles, raised on a square plinth. This print is dedicated to Sir William Hamilton, the special consul to Naples, who was well known for his famous collection of antiquities including terra cotta vases and for a time owned the vase. Hamilton gave it to his nephew, the Earl of Warwick, and the original stood at Warwick Castle until the 1970s, when it was sold to the Burrell Collection in Glasgow, where it is now on display.

Wilton-Ely Description: "Large vase found at the Pantanello, Hadrian's Villa, Tivoli, in 1770 (The "Warwick Vase"). Front view with pedestal. Dedicated 'A Sua Exzellenza il Sig. Cav. Hamilton Ministro Plenipotenziario della M'ta. Di Giorgio III. Re. della Gran Brettagna presso alla M'ta di Ferdinando IV RE delle due Sicilie...' Signature, lower left."

Addition from|Robert Wenley:

My understanding is that Piranesi would have made detailed drawings (at least one survives) of the fragments and his proposed reconstruction, and then these would have been used by the sculptor-mason (now known to have been a Frenchman in Rome, Grandjacquet) to work out and carve the body of the vase into & onto which the original pieces were inserted. There is a bit more in the BM vases & Volcanoes exhibition catalogue (on Sir William Hamilton) from a few years back which should be fairly easily available.

Notes and Calendar

Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and his Collection

Exhibition, British Museum, 13 March–14 July 1996

Catalogue by Ian Jenkins and Kim Sloan, London, British Museum Press, 1996.

ISBN 0–7141–1766–8, 320 pp., 150 col. illus., 138 b. & w. illus. £25.

Twentieth British Museum Classical Colloquium, 24–26 April 1996

The acquisition of Sir William Hamilton's first collection of vases in 1772 represented a pivotal moment in the development of the British Museum. In the century that followed the fledgling antiquarian collections gained in size and influence to such a degree that eventually they drove out of Bloomsbury the natural history specimens that had defined the character of the founding collection. There is a curious irony in the fact that the purchase which set in motion this train of events was made from a man for whom 'Vases and Volcanoes' were complementary rather than competing passions.

In his prime, Hamilton was respected as a diplomat, connoisseur, scientist and collector. Mounting financial pressures denied him the opportunity of full enjoyment of his achievement, or indeed of his collections, elements of which were repeatedly sacrificed to meet his debts. More notoriously, the infatuation of his celebrated wife Emma with the national hero Lord Nelson, paraded in so many merciless but memorable caricatures of the age, have tended hitherto to obscure his solid achievements.

Even before leaving England in 1764 for Naples, where he was to spend the greater part of the next thirty-six years, Hamilton had shown himself a collector, principally of Old Master paintings which he could ill afford; Horace Walpole, indeed, feared that ruination awaited the acquisitive yet impecunious Hamilton in Italy — 'picture-made in virtu-land'. Recognition of this early preoccupation of Hamilton's has gained significantly from exposure in the exhibition and has been set in context by Kim Sloane, both in the catalogue and in a keynote lecture at the colloquium.

At Naples Hamilton occupied a central position in a society where the Grand Tour brought almost every young man of quality to the court of the Envoy Extraordinary. Although the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies never lay at the centre of European power-politics, Hamilton capitalized on the antiquarian resources of the Neapolitan province to carve a niche for himself contributing at the same time to the establishment of the specifically Hellenic character southern Italy in the pre-Roman era. In this context the recognition of the vases which formed so important a part of Hamilton's collection as Greek rather than Etruscan in origin played a central part.

The vases naturally receive the full treatment (notably from Ian Jenkins) in both the exhibition and the catalogue, as they did in the colloquium (organized by Lucilla Burn, herself a vase specialist at the British Museum). Hamilton by no means initiated interest in them: Claire Lyons demonstrated the debt owed by Hamilton to earlier Neapolitan collectors, notably the Duca di Carafa Noia and the Marchese Felice Maria Mastrilli, from whose cabinets he purchased in bulk in his early years. Later Hamilton's interest in archaeology (rather than mere vase collecting) was aroused, fired no doubt by discoveries being made at the time at Pompeii.

Hamilton's first collection of vases formed the basis of a four-volume catalogue,