

Ancient art and the eighteenth-century auction: Collecting, catalogues and competition

NICOLE COCHRANE 

Abstract: This article explores the role of the auction in the formation and dispersal of collections of ancient art in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain. I demonstrate that competitive collecting, as well as the culture of acquiring as well as fragmenting collections at auction, had a profound effect on the way in which British buyers collected and displayed antiquities within their private collections. I argue that through an exploration of two textual sites, the auction and collection catalogue, we can observe that collectors carefully curated their collections, visually as well as textually, in order to craft specific narratives centered on the act of auction collecting, shaping and shifting the ways in which collectors understood and curated the art of antiquity.

Keywords: antiquity, art market, auction, collecting, provenance, sculpture

I. Introduction

In Frances Burney's 1782 novel *Cecelia, or Memoirs of an Heiress*, the eponymous heroine attends an auction for the liquidation of the estate of Lord and Lady Belgrade. Newly arrived in London, she is warned that 'all the world will be there ... there'll be such a monstrous crowd as you never saw in your life. I dare say we will be squeezed to death.'¹ Burney's fictional saleroom is a public and theatrical spectacle where people from across the social strata jostle and fight to witness the liquidation of the estate of wealthy persons and was closely modeled on the actual salerooms of Georgian London.² Through the efforts of charismatic and savvy business-minded auctioneers such as James Christie (1730–1803), 'the specious orator,' and Samuel Baker (d.1778), the founder of Sotheby's, the auction became a crucial space for sale and collection of not only fine art but also books, furniture, decorative arts and textiles as well as land and everyday items.³ Auctions were also an importance space for the sale and collection of antiquities, particularly sculpture and vases from Greco-Roman antiquity. Despite this, little scholarship has focused on this market as a key experience of antiquities collecting for Britain's wealthy elite, where objects and artworks were observed and circulated amongst a close circle of homosocial collecting networks. In focusing on the sales of ancient art at auction in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, this article illuminates this underexplored trade in classical art through the auction saleroom.⁴ I assert that, through the auction, antiquities were intimately connected with the identities and biases of their former and new owners, changing the ways in which ancient art was viewed and interpreted in Britain, offering new perspectives on antiquities trade, collection formation and identity construction.

Applying a lens of competitive collecting and social interaction, this article makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge and understanding around the auction's crucial role in the formation of art markets and value. It draws from, but more importantly builds upon, the few studies devoted to the broader history of auctions.⁵

Studies such as Charles Heath's *Dynamics of the Auction* and Charles Smith's *Auctions and the Social Construction of Value* have tended to emphasize the economic and social dynamics of the auction, not the auction site as a site where collecting culture meets in one place.⁶ Smith asserts that auctions established a community of buyers, which actively produced and renegotiated the value of objects.⁷ Vital for understanding auction histories is Cynthia Wall's article "The English Auction: Narratives of Dismantlings."⁸ Wall asserts the eighteenth-century auction as a necessarily social space in which it was possible to traverse between social and economic boundaries and identifies the auction as a space in which the dispersal of the collection allowed buyers to seemingly buy a modicum of the lifestyle of the seller and thus emulate the life and identity of the previous owner through the collected object.⁹ Most recently, the edited collection *London and the Emergence of a European Art Market, 1780–1820*, which resituates the London auction as being part of a pan-European network of objects, dealers and buyers, makes little study of auction sales of sculpture that occurred during this period.¹⁰

Studies researching the art market for ancient sculpture in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century have tended to focus on the networks of dealers and patrons, with Ilaria Bignimini, Clare Hornsby and Vicky Coltman in particular illuminating the important role of expatriate dealers working in Rome in the formation of many of Britain's most important sculpture collections.¹¹ However, most collectors also supplemented their correspondence collecting with purchases through the London auction market, with those of limited means and connections purchasing large portions of their collections through auction sales. The auction presented a uniquely opportunistic space for the acquisition of ancient art for British buyers, allowing purchases of multiple lots as well as avoiding the costly procedure of export and transport of artworks from Italy. This became an even more crucial collecting space when, in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, travel to continental Europe was restricted and export more difficult.

Drawing on this scholarship, but using the auction as a lens, this article offers new interpretations of the role of competitive buying and social interactions between buyers and its effect on the acquisition and display of classical sculpture in this period. It does so to argue that collectors felt the need to imprint their own narratives upon the collection, to subsume previous narratives into their own and to establish their own identities as collectors. In order to do this, it draws comparisons across two key textual sites in which collecting, competition and identity intersect – the auction catalogue and the collection description.

In particular, it will focus on two main collectors for which substantial archives of both printed auction catalogues and both manuscript and printed collection catalogues survive. First, it examines Charles Townley (1737–1805), who built an ambitious collection of ancient sculpture that spanned his entire home at Park Street in Westminster. Upon his death in 1805, his collection went on to form the first major acquisition of ancient sculpture at the British Museum.¹² The Townley Archive, held in the British Museum's Central Archive, houses the personal papers amassed by Townley, including an extensive collection of auction catalogues spanning the 1770s through to the 1820s, many of which are annotated by Townley or one of his agents buying for him at auction. Second, it discusses the architect and academician Sir John Soane (1753–1837), who was a similarly avid collector of auction catalogues, often acquiring multiple copies of important sales such as that of the sale of Robert Adam, held at Christie's in 1818 (Soane owned five copies of this sale catalogue).¹³ Soane's home at Lincoln's Inn Fields in London preserves Soane's vast collection of sculpture, casts, paintings, drawings, books and more as they were displayed upon his death in 1837.

II. Catalogues and Competition

The eighteenth-century auction offered an explicitly public as well as sociable mode of collection formation in which the dispersal and formation of collections were played out live for the public. While William Roberts, in his *Memorials of Christies* (1897), wrote that 'it was at one time the fashion of persons of quality to frequent sales and make purchases for themselves,'¹⁴ archival material suggests that collectors of ancient sculpture preferred to use agents purchasing on their behalf in the physical auction. Sir John Soane made use of several agents, including his friend the antiquary John Britton (1771-1857), and men in his employ including his painter and glazier William Watson and his cabinet maker John Robbins.¹⁵ In Charles Townley's collection of auction catalogues, held at the British Museum, we similarly see a network of friends and professionals trusted to carry out purchases in his place including the sculptor Joseph Nollekens, who acted as Townley's agent at least one of the three sales of the collection of Henry Constantine Jennings between 1778 and 1779.¹⁶ These agents were clearly highly competent individuals, with collectors trusting their taste and judgement in finding a worthwhile piece and competing with fellow buyers. For example, at the Attingham sale of 1827, in which John Soane engaged William Watson as agent, his catalogue marginalia included the words 'wish to have,' beside a *View of Pompeii* by Phillip Hackert and the note 'must purchase' beside an antique candelabra, indicating instructions for Watson about the most favored pieces, likely picked out by Soane before the sale.¹⁷ Annotations in the same catalogue also included the phrase 'if reasonable' and 'if good,' suggesting Soane may have not seen some of the individual pieces in person but trusted Watson's judgement as to whether they were worth purchasing. While broader studies of the eighteenth-century auction have focused on the auction as a physical space for social interaction, the catalogue, specifically through the contemplation of objects and discursive annotation, shows that collecting antiquity through the auction engaged a complex network of buyers, agents and auctioneers where value, quality and desirability were constantly negotiated.

It was common for auction catalogues to be released and circulated days or weeks prior to the sale, giving buyers time to review lots for sale and make judgements on pieces of interest. Some professional auctioneers such as James Christie opened salerooms for special receptions for 'private view' days, where 'persons of distinction congregated in great numbers' in order to preview lots.¹⁸ In these cases, buyers such as Townley and Soane could also have visited the saleroom prior to the auction, making note of the favored pieces and relaying this information for the agent on the day. But in the absence of physically viewing of the collection, the auction catalogue could act as an important textual space in which the collection could be constructed, dismantled and reimagined in the mind of the reader and prospective buyer.

Some auctions were held within the home of the seller. The 1801 Christie's sale of William Ponsonby, 2nd Earl of Bessborough, which included a large number of antiquities, was held in the Earl's villa of Bessborough House in Roehampton (now known as Parkstead House).¹⁹ As Cynthia Wall has explored, the title of the auction catalogue was an important narrative tool used by the auctioneer to build interest and excitement.²⁰ By referring to the previous owner as 'an unspecified gentleman' or 'man of taste,' the catalogue reinforced the prestige of the collection, perpetuating the possibility of acquiring not only the lots for sale but also a modicum of the status of the previous owner along with it.²¹ For the Bessborough sale, this ambiguity was completely relegated to the catalogue. The title proclaimed the collection as having been 'the property of a noble earl, deceased,'. However, by being held at Bessborough House, Bessborough's

ownership of the collection apparent, and allowed buyers to observe the intimate connection between object and owner within the staged space. Additionally, operating within a close homosocial network of collectors and antiquaries, it is likely Bessborough's collection would have been known and viewed by his contemporaries and buyers.

The auction was a place that projected concepts of upward social mobility through the purchase of commodities. As Wall notes, auctions 'present a dissolution of an existing structure; they visibly reorder that living social structure; and they implicitly offer a new order to the highest bidder.'²² This would have had particular relevance for those wishing to buy ancient art. For much of the eighteenth century, the acquisition of classical art would have been seen as the preserve of the aristocracy and the well connected, who had the vast funds needed to acquire and transport pieces of stone sculpture from Italy to England.²³ Stricter export rules placed by the papal authorities, coupled with the restricted access to Europe in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, further restricted the flow of antiquities to England, making the auction a vital space for collecting antiquities in this period. The auction therefore presented a more accessible space in which anyone with the available funds could compete for artworks.

Auction catalogues are an excellent source of potential insight into collector's opinions and assessments of their contemporaries. Their circulation prior to the auction meant that they could be read and scrutinised multiple times prior to the auction as well as providing a detailed list of the possessions of fellow collectors. The auction catalogues in the archives of both Charles Townley and John Soane are extensively annotated with marginalia, which suggest they were annotated before, during and after the auction. Comments included in the catalogues include critical assessment of objects. For example, at the 1835 Deville sale, held at Christie's, Soane marked his auction catalogue with the word 'doubtful' beside two lots, both antique sculptures (a figure of a 'historic muse' and a bust of Homer) calling into question their authenticity.²⁴ Similarly, Townley's catalogue archive includes a rather critical note detailing 'marbles pillaged from the Vatican and brought by an English merchant at Leghorn.'²⁵ This critical comment did not stop Townley from making purchases at the sale, as a later comment at the end states that 'lots marked X were bought.' Annotations could also include praise for particular works. At the Henry Constantine Jennings Sale of 1779, at which Townley used Nollekens as agent, an annotation notes that 'amongst the bustos is a fine head of Jupiter Anxur [Jupiter as a youth], presumed a matchless performance,' which was not purchased by Townley despite the appraisal of its quality.²⁶

The most telling insight into the competitive nature of antiquities collecting at auction in the archives of Soane and Townley can be seen in the frequent listing of purchasers. The Soane and Townley catalogues contained often meticulous annotations of prices paid by each buyer, with some going as far as to include totals paid by particular buyers across lots. This could also serve a practical purpose, as Townley often facilitated transactions for others, such as Henry Blundell. From these annotations, we can see how frequently sales of ancient art were dominated by the major figures in eighteenth-century sculpture collecting and that contemporary collectors kept a keen eye on the circulation of works throughout Britain. For example, the catalogue for the Cawdor Sale of 1800, list buyers including Townley and Soane, as well as Henry Blundell, Joseph Nollekens, Thomas Hope, Charles Heathcote Tatham and Francis Russell, 5th Duke of Bedford.²⁷ If most auctions were attended by agents, then this marginalia shows that collectors were closely monitoring the dispersal of collections and building of others. It also suggests a close social network in which buyers and agents were aware of who was acting on behalf of whom.

This network of collectors, competing for antiquities and observing their contemporaries, would have fostered a competitive, but friendly, rivalry between buyers, with objects moving within an established community. We can therefore see the auction as not only a key space for collecting formation but also as a vital physical and textual space in which communities of antiquities were formed. It is unsurprising that many of the main collectors of ancient art in Britain were members of the Society of Antiquaries, Fellows of the Royal Society and members of the Society of the Dilettanti, known as much for their rakishness as their interest in antiquity.²⁸ Townley, in particular, was constantly aware of the kinds of collections built by his contemporaries and how they compared to his own. In a letter from the dealer Thomas Jenkins, he remarks to Townley that 'I am sorry that Knole & Newby have warmd[sic] you, but desire only, that you will judge your wife as you did of your mistress,'²⁹ referencing the collections of John Sackville, Duke of Dorset and William Weddell, respectively. The metaphor of the collection, or of particular sculptures, as being Townley's wife was a frequent joke in Townley's correspondence, most commonly used for his attachment to the bust of Clytie, now in the British Museum.³⁰ Similarly in 1775, Jenkins again wrote to Townley, after viewing the collection of Lyde Browne that 'I think you [Townley] are a little inclined to fornication in virtu, and apt to see other people's wives with the eye of a mistress.'³¹ The exchanges between Townley and Jenkins and the implied erotic and voyeuristic nature in viewing other sculpture collections also highlight the covetousness and jealousy felt when one's collection was compared with another's.

Over his life, Townley compiled meticulous notes on collected objects, their display and often his opinions of them, in British collections. Coltman has argued that these manuscripts constitute an effort by Townley to create a catalogue of ancient art in Britain, much like Adolf Michaelis would produce in 1882.³² While these collected documents certainly show a desire to survey and collate a comprehensive study of contemporary collections, it is also possible to view them as an evaluation of all the collections of his contemporaries; they allowed an easy means for Townley to compare his own 'lustful eye' with that of others. In these accounts, some of Townley's recorded observations were less praiseworthy of his fellow collectors. For example, after visiting Thomas Hope's Duchess Street home, in which several suites of rooms were purposely outfitted and designed by Hope for the display of his antiquities, Townley quoted from Alexander Pope's *Epistles* IV: 'Something there is more needful than expense, and something previous ev'n to taste ... 'tis sense.'³³ Pope's verse lampooned those who acquired vast collections of useless materials in a show of false 'taste,' and Townley's use of the verse shows his strong animosity towards Hope's collection. The Pope quotation enabled particular reference to Hope's vast wealth as a member of a Dutch banking magnate family. If Townley's efforts to record the collections of his contemporaries were aimed at the appraisal and condemnation of their efforts, then the auction could therefore be the ultimate culmination of these lustful glances and damning critique, with the collector able to finally act on his impulses, acquiring the objects he desired for himself.

To the antiquities collector, the auction presented the opportune space to expand and acquire objects likely known to them through their social and intellectual networks. However, key to the auction was the idea of dispersal and the dismantling of the collection. The auction destabilises the collection and the intimate relationship between person and object, removing the collector and his identity from the space, as well as making the active collecting of new buyers possible.³⁴ This would have been starkly apparent for auctions conducted within the homes of the seller, where prospective buyers were able to traverse the home of the former owner, viewing objects in situ before their sale. For collectors

buying at auction, this destabilising would have brought to the fore anxieties for their own collections, making them aware of the possibility that their own belongings would be sold after their death. This likely had an effect on the decisions made by collectors like Townley and Soane, who bequeathed collections to the nation under strict stipulations as to placement and display of the collection after their death.³⁵ For Horace Walpole, the auction brought into stark reality the potential for his own collection be dispersed, writing in a letter of 1793:

'What is permanent? And what does not present morality and mortality to my old memory! And what a string vibrates on a Houghton demolished! ... Who knows how soon my playthings may fall under Mr Christie's hammer!'³⁶

In 1778, Walpole had witnessed the sale of the family picture collection, built by his father Sir Robert Walpole, at his family home of Houghton Hall. For Walpole, the dispersal of the home, and therefore the collection, is likened to a deeply traumatic event, causing him to ruminate on his own mortality. In 1747, just 2 years after the death of his father, Walpole compiled the *Aedes Walpolianae, or Description of Pictures at Houghton Hall* as a way of explicitly cataloguing the collection for posterity, seeking to form a textual connection between father and son.³⁷ For collectors like Walpole, the intimate ties between the self and the home are irrevocably severed at the auction, with the fragmentation of the collection akin to the fragmentation of the self.

If we see the collector as someone who has a cherished and sustained relationship with their possessions, then it is reasonable to assume that the selling of such an object was a difficult or traumatic process, done under extreme circumstance, such as financial difficulty. For example, in 1801, Sir William Hamilton began to make plans to sell his collection of ancient fictile vases at Christies in order to raise funds, eventually selling them as one large lot to Thomas Hope.³⁸ However, the majority of sales of this kind were carried out after the death of the collector, conducted by the next of kin or legatees, either uninterested in collecting themselves or wishing to form collections of their own. As others have shown, auctions were often associated with undertaking and death, with many auctioneers, such as Thomas Skinner, doubling as cabinet and coffin makers.³⁹ The auction likely brought to the fore anxieties for prospective collectors, who by experiencing and participating in the dismantling of another person's collection, began to contemplate the ultimate fate of their own.

III. *Collecting Prestige*

From the Renaissance, the culture of collecting ancient art included the circulation of artworks between collections, particularly across Europe, with most transactions facilitated through British expatriate dealers such as James Byres and Thomas Jenkins, who made purchases at the sales of the Italian elite in the eighteenth century.⁴⁰ While the high-quality collections such as those of the Uffizi or Borghese were out of reach for buyers, there was a steady stream of vendors amongst the Roman nobility, who, in the eighteenth century, were willing to part with lesser pieces.⁴¹ One of the most notable of these individuals was the Cardinal Alessandro Albani, who frequently sold lesser quality pieces to British buyers, in order to make room for higher-quality artworks in his own ever-expanding collection.⁴²

In this way, the collections of ancient art in Britain were in themselves an act of emulation of the collections of the Italian nobility stretching back to the Renaissance. Objects accrued prestige from having been formerly owned by members of the Italian nobility; this

is clear from how frequent important names are referenced in British collection catalogues, such as Mattei, Borriani and D'Este. In some cases, the names of former owners of collections are substituted with the names of the palace or home of the owner, such as Villa Mattei, used in place of Giuseppe Mattei, the vendor of the family collection in the 1770s.⁴³ This use of geographical location as an object signifier offered a tangible link between the viewer in England and the object's history. By having a defined and proven provenance, as well as the physical transition of an object across geographical and temporal distances, objects were imbued with a specific value. For antiquities, this value was closely tied to notion of status and class, demonstrating the collector's ability to foster the connections as well as muster the financial undertaking required to acquire and transport ancient art.⁴⁴

Ancient sculpture therefore had strong narrative ties to its Italian noble heritage through its history of acquisition and display. The purchase of ancient art from an Italian collection allowed British buyers to insert themselves as the intellectual and cultural inheritors of the classical tradition. Buying classical art through auction added a further layer to the narratives of collecting tied to objects, adding another British provenance to the artwork and its history. Auction catalogues could purposefully reinforce the relationship between owner and collection by acknowledging these provenances or choose to sever it by omitting this information. The auction also severed the living relationship between object and owner, removing the personal contexts and connections and therefore removing or obscuring narratives. The auction was therefore a further step in the object's biography, providing another layer to the narratives of collecting, one which was distinctly British in character, which allowed new owners to layer their own narratives of ownership on top. As serious antiquities collecting by British elites did not become common practice until the late seventeenth century, the act of buying through British auctions allowed collectors to align themselves and their collecting practices with a more recent history of collecting. One of the ways this layering was accomplished was through the collection catalogue or guide.

Catalogues and guidebooks were commonly produced by antiquities collectors. From the small personal inventories, to elaborate illustrated folios such as Sir Richard Worsley's *Museum Worsleyanum* (1794), collection catalogues were personal expressions of interest and taste for the private collection, in a way that was more intimate than published journals or commissioned for the advancement of knowledge, such as those produced by the Dilettanti, aiming to provide contextual information and guidance for visitors and interested parties.

These documents offer insights into collections, curation and taste, as they often were revised and reprinted in order to present the most up-to-date information. Charles Townley produced a series of Parlour Catalogues, small manuscript descriptions and inventories for the perusal of visitors. The first dated version dates to 1782; this was revised in 1802 and again in 1804, along with several undated catalogues including one compiled by Baron de Hancarville and a Parlour Catalogue produced by Simon Townley.⁴⁵ John Soane similarly produced successive descriptions and guidebooks for his collection. These included *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting* (1827), authored by Soane's friend, the antiquarian John Britton, and a series of three guidebooks, titled *Description of the House and Museum on the North Side of Lincoln's Inn Fields*, authored by Soane and published in 1830, 1832 and 1835.⁴⁶ Similarly to the auction catalogue, the collection catalogue was a way in which to textually preserve the collection in a moment of time, the information preserved within it carefully crafted to tell visitors important information by the owner. It was also a site in which intertextuality between the collection

and the auction catalogue could provide important layering of provenances and histories of collecting.

In March 1780, the bookseller and auctioneer Samuel Peterson (1728–1802) conducted the sale of the effects of Topham Beauclerk (1739–1780).⁴⁷ Beauclerk, the great-grandson of Charles II and Nell Gwyn, was known for his close friendship with Samuel Johnson and was a member of the Societies of the Dilettanti and Antiquaries and a registered reader of the British Museum. Beauclerk, independently wealthy and well connected, built a vast collection that included ‘minerals, fossils, shells and corals, and other subjects of natural history; a very capital collection of philosophical, mathematical and optical instruments [and] an extensive chemical apparatus.’⁴⁸ Antiquities made up a small portion of Beauclerk’s collection, though he clearly was knowledgeable in the arts, with a description in Hawkin’s *Life of Johnson* noting ‘in painting and sculpture his taste judgement were accurate, in classic literature, exquisite; and in the knowledge of history, and the study of antiquities, he had few equals.’⁴⁹

Beauclerk was acting within a wider cultural practice of polite accomplishment, which included collecting art, antiquities, natural history and science as a marker of educated taste. In fact, much of Beauclerk’s antiquities collection had been inherited, rather than purchased, originating with a benefactor of Beauclerk’s father, Richard Topham (1671–1730), an MP for New Windsor and Keeper of the Records of the Tower of London from 1707 to 1725. While Richard Topham’s interest in antiquities collecting was limited to the purchase of a few pieces, he was certainly interested in the study and appreciation of existing collections. He amassed a collection of over 3000 drawings, watercolours and prints after antique sculptures and frescos during travels in Italy, which he bequeathed to his alma mater, Eton College.⁵⁰ Richard Topham’s will included the wish that the remainder of his collection should remain intact within his home, suggesting an intimate bond between the collection and its display similar to that of other collectors who donated or sold collections to museums in order to ensure they remained as one unit.⁵¹ Upon his death in 1730, his collection passed first to his sister and her second husband and finally to his protegee Sidney Beauclerk, who named his son Topham in his honour.

When Topham Beauclerk died in 1780, he left almost all his properties to his wife Diana (née Spencer), and it has been suggested that the sale of his collection, which occurred the same year he died, was arranged in order to pay off debts acquired during his lifetime.⁵² Antiquities constituted a minor part of the Beauclerk’s auction and consisted of lots 104–118. Of these, Charles Townley purchased an inscription to Septimius Severus (lot 114), a Greek inscription from Smyrna (lot 105) and a funerary bas-relief of a girl with a dog (lot 106). Other buyers included Joseph Banks, who acquired a votive relief of a woman pouring a libation to a hero, now also in the British Museum.⁵³ The collecting provenance (from Richard Topham through to Topham Beauclerk) was not stated within Paterson’s auction catalogue but proudly stated by Townley within the ‘Parlour Catalogues.’ The antiquities were displayed openly in key areas of Townley’s Park Street home and given full descriptions in his Parlour Catalogues. The Septimius Severus inscription is recorded in Townley’s 1804 Parlour Catalogue as being displayed in the Hall (Figure 1) alongside the Smyrna inscription, which was furnished with a full (but inaccurate) translation of the Greek in the catalogue. The funerary relief, displayed in the street parlour, was similarly given a full translation of the Greek, although Townley incorrectly recorded the age as one, not ten.⁵⁴ This name recognition within the Parlour Catalogues suggests the existence of a close homosocial network of antiquities collectors in which knowledge of contemporary collections was pervasive. The Smyrna inscription, which would have



1. William Chambers, *The Townley Marbles in the Entrance Hall at 7 Park Street, Westminster*, 1794, ink and watercolour on paper 390 × 540 mm. © The Trustees of the British Museum [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

been one of the first objects encountered as visitors entered the house through the entrance hall, was described in Townley's Parlour Catalogue as 'a Greek sepulchral inscription, twenty inches square, purchac'd at Mr Topham Beauclerk's sale 1780, and formerly belonging to Mr Topham of Windsor's collection.'⁵⁵ Similarly, for the Septimius Severus inscription, it is described as being 'formerly belonged to Mr Topham of Windsor, and passed by inheritance to Mr Topham Beauclerk, from whom it came to this collection.'⁵⁶ These inscriptions (at the time relatively inexpensive and not as highly prized as figurative sculptures) could have easily been assimilated into the rubric of the Townley collection.⁵⁷ Inscriptions were displayed by Townley in his Entrance Hall and Hallway in large numbers, displaying them as part of a wider collection of inscriptions, rather than as singular pieces of note.⁵⁸ As both Richard Topham and Topham Beauclerk's identities were tied to their pursuit of book, print and drawing collection, their presence and provenance within Townley's collection served to contribute to Townley's self-fashioning as a learned collector by aligning himself with them, without a strong narrative of antiquities collection to overpower his own. The Beauclerk auction shows that in acquiring objects of prestige, collectors did not limit their activities to the sales of those who had established names as antiquities collectors and the sales of notable figures of elite learning. Here, the purchased object came to embody the prestige of its previous owner and was displayed by collectors as a prized piece.

If the auction allowed buyers to associate the prestige of the previous owner with a newly collected object, then it would have been a particularly appealing forum for those with more limited professional status and social networks who were wishing to acquire stand out pieces. One such man was Sir John Soane, who was a constant purchaser at

auction, often acquiring large job lots or lower priced artworks.⁵⁹ One of Soane's most notable auction purchases occurred at the 1800 sale of the collection of John Campbell, 1st Baron Cawdor (1755-1821). Cawdor had established a reputation as an art collector and patron, collecting art and antiquities whilst travelling in Italy and establishing a museum at his home on London's Oxford Street for the display of his collection.⁶⁰ Cawdor had gifted some pieces of his collection to Charles Townley during his lifetime, including a figure of an African acrobat balanced on a crocodile and a marble statuette of the god Pan.⁶¹ But by 1800, Cawdor, made Baron Cawdor of Castlemartin in 1796, made the decision to sell the contents of his museum. Conducted by Skinner and Dyke, who had overseen the auction of the Duchess of Portland's museum in 1786, the auction catalogue proclaimed a sale over 2 days of the 'capital and valuable collection of Ancient marbles,' as well as 'a choice and matchless selection of Etruscan vases,' which has formerly belonged in an 'interesting and magnificent gallery.'⁶²

Charles Townley purchased several lots, including a colossal head of Apollo and a granite hand. Other buyers included Henry Blundell, Thomas Hope and Francis Russell, 7th Duke of Bedford, who purchased the famous Lante Vase (supposedly found on the ruins of Hadrian's villa) for Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire.⁶³ As with the Beauclerk sale, Townley used his catalogue to openly reference pieces as having been formerly belonging to Cawdor, as well as making the distinction between pieces that were gifts from Cawdor and those that had been purchased at auction. In doing this, through his Parlour Catalogues, Townley was able to create a narrative of himself as not only a collector of antiquities but also as a collector of collections themselves, picking choice objects from the sales of his contemporaries and bringing them together within his home for the enjoyment of his visitors.

John Soane stood apart from other buyers at the sale. Unlike the landed gentry class represented by Townley and his circle or the vastly family wealth of Thomas Hope, Soane was still newly wealthy, having inherited £30,000 from the uncle of his wife, Eliza (née Smith), in 1790. At this time, he was continuing to establish himself as a major architect in Georgian London, working on the Bank of England from 1788. At the Cawdor sale, Soane likely could not compete with wealthy collectors for the major show pieces of the sale (for example, the Lante Vase was purchased by the Duke of Bedford for £735). At the auction, Soane purchased just one piece of art – the Cawdor Vase (Figure 2), an Apulian Mascaroon krater dating to around the late fourth century BC for which he paid £68,500.⁶⁴ The piece was clearly an important part of Soane's collection and was referenced throughout his descriptions and catalogues. We can chart the changing displays and evolution of Soane's home and museum through the succession of guides, catalogues and descriptions produced over a period of 8 years. Britton's *Union*, which described Soane's collection by type rather than a room-by-room description, noted that the Cawdor Vase 'is to be admired for its extraordinary size, the numerous figures represented upon it, and its elegant enrichments,' as well as stating that it came to be in Soane's possession 'from having been in the museum of that eminent nobleman [Cawdor].'⁶⁵ It follows a similar formula as the descriptions of Townley's Parlour Catalogues, combining a description of the object and a note on its provenance.

In the 1830 *Description*, the first to be authored by Soane himself, the vase is shown as being displayed within the dining room atop a table before a window which views over the monument court.⁶⁶ As with Britton's account, it provides little in the way of description or explanation, stating that it was 'purchased at the sale of Lord Cawdor's effects.'⁶⁷ The dining room was where Soane displayed a similar Apulian barrel amphora, also purchased at auction. Known as the Englefield Vase, it was purchased at the sale of the



2. The Cawdor Vase, Apulian Mascaroon Krater, late 4th century BC, 920 × 480 mm. Photo: © Sir John Soane's Museum, London. Photograph by AC Cooper. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

collection of Henry Charles Englefield at Christies in 1823.⁶⁸ Both the 1830 and the updated 1832 versions were privately printed in small numbers and distributed amongst friends and colleagues.

In 1833, Soane cemented the status and value of his Lincoln's Inn Fields display as a public museum through the Soane Museum Act, and this was reflected in the 1835 *Description*, the last to be produced before his death. The text now included the conditions of the museum act and further embellished the narrative with the addition of a second voice in conversation with that of Soane. Provided by Soane's close friend, the author Barbara Hofland, this voice was interwoven within Soane's own and provided a first-person narrative about Lincoln's Inn Fields, which focus largely on the viewer's experience and the emotional and physical effects created by the space.⁶⁹ Hofland's text emphatically praises the Cawdor and Englefield vases, noting she has 'seldom seen any of equal magnitude, and perhaps none of equal value ... may we reckon them amongst the highest gifts of the Arts, and the choicest treasures which opulence and taste can accumulate.'⁷⁰ The series of *Descriptions* all similarly praise the Cawdor and Englefield vases for their style and beauty, drawing particular attention to their link with former owners by pointedly naming them. The explicit naming of objects as their former owners, a practice the museum continues to do to this day, allowed collectors to layer their ownership and the narratives of collecting and connoisseurship. For Soane, the collection catalogue was the key site for aligning his collection with those of Cawdor and Englefield, and the landed gentry with whom he wished to align himself and his collection.

In the private manuscript and printed catalogues produced by Townley and Soane, we see an effort by collectors to explicitly state the provenance of pieces bought at auction, explicitly linking collections together as objects passed from former to new owners. For

collectors such as Townley, doing this allowed him to present his collection as the leading one in the land, consisting of the choicest sculptures acquired from the auctions he had attended and through which he was able to select prime works from the collections of other men. For Soane, on the other hand, the auction became a space for upward mobility, where the purchase, display and reception of antiquities formerly owned by notable collectors offered a means by which to physically and textually establish himself as a member of Britain's elite network of antiquities collectors.

IV. Conclusion

The eighteenth-century auction presented an important physical space for the sale of collections, presenting buyers and spectators with a stage from which to observe the dismantling and building of collections. It also was a uniquely opportunistic space for those wishing to buy ancient art, particularly during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when export from continental Europe was increasingly restricted. In the context of eighteenth-century antiquities collecting, auctions fostered convivial competition between a small and connected section of Britain's wealthy male elite, enabling the circulation of antiquities between their townhouses and country houses for their display of their own wealth and learning. In the absence of physically visiting the auction, the catalogue, circulated and observed prior to the auction, was a vital tool for the contemplation, evaluation and dismantling of former collection, as well as the construction of new spaces.

The practice of antiquities collecting in eighteenth-century Britain was entrenched in a tradition of transactions between buyers, with the provenance of having belonged to a noble Italian family often proudly stated in auction and personal catalogues. When these objects were then sold via the auction sale room, British buyers were able to further insert themselves within the object's history of collecting. For some, such as Charles Townley, this allowed him to create a new narrative, through both his own physical display of the object and through his collection catalogues. These avenues enabled him to present himself as a collector of collections, able to create the choicest selection of ancient art in London. In comparison, it could also provide a more open forum for collection for those with the financial means needed to purchase antiquities who could use collection building as a means of acquiring some of the prestige and status of the object's previous owner. Name recognition, such as the Cawdor Vase at Sir John Soane's Museum, became signifiers of this connection between old owner and new. The collection catalogue, meticulously crafted and refined by the collector, was a textual site in which collectors were able to use auction provenances to their own advantage. The auction, its catalogues and the actions of collecting and dispersal, was therefore an important space for the creation, as well as the dismantling of narratives about personal taste and object identities. The auction market, and the competitive arena it created, was crucial to understanding the dialogues created between collectors and antiquities during the long eighteenth-century.

NOTES

This research is based upon work undertaken during my doctoral studies, generously supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, to whom I am very grateful.

1. F. Burney, *Cecelia, or Memoirs of an Heiress*, eds. P. Sabor & M. A. Doody (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.24.
2. C. van Hensbergen, 'Anne Oldfield's domestic interiors: auctions, material culture and celebrity' in E. D Jones & V. Joule (eds), *Intimacy and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Literary Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
3. R. Macarthur & J. Stobart, 'Going for a song? Country house sales in Georgian England', in J. Stobart, and I. Van Damme (eds), *Modernity and Second-Hand Trade: European Consumption Culture and Practices 1700-1900* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.175-195.
4. A recent study which particularly explores the influence of the auction of art sales is S. Avery-Quash & C. Huemer (eds), *London and the Emergence of a European Art Market, 1780-1820* (Los Angeles, Getty Publications: 2019), however it largely ignores the trade in ancient art.
5. B. Learmount, *A History of the Auction* (Iver: Barnard & Learmont, 1985); J. M. Montias, *Art at Auction in Seventeenth Century Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002); S. Huda, *Pedigree and Panache: A History of the Art Auction in Australia* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2008).
6. C. Heath, *Dynamics of the Auction: Social Interaction and the Sale of Fine Art and Antiquities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); C. Smith, *Auctions and the Social Construction of Value* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
7. Smith, *Auctions: The Social Construction of Value*, p.4.
8. C. Wall, 'The English auction: narratives of dismantlings' *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 31:1 (1997), p.1-25.
9. Wall, 'The English Auction', p.21.
10. S. Avery-Quash & C. Huemer (eds.), *London and the Emergence of a European Art Market, 1780-1820* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2019).
11. I. Bignamini & C. Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing in Eighteenth Century Rome* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010); V. Coltman, *Classical Sculpture and the Culture of Collecting in Britain Since 1760* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); R. Guilding, *Owning the Past: Why the English Collected Antique Sculpture, 1640-1840* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2014).
12. See B. Cook, *The Townley Marbles* (London: British Museum Press, 1985).
13. *A catalogue of a valuable collection of antique sculpture, of Greek and Roman workmanship; ... Which will be sold by auction, by Mr. Christie, in a temporary saloon, in the timber yard of Mr. Forest, near Westminster Bridge, on the Surry side, on Friday, May the 22d. 1818*, (London, 1818). Sir John Soane's Museum, Sale Catalogue 1818:05:22.
14. W. Roberts, *Memorials of Christie's, A Record of Art Sales from 1766 to 1896* (London, G. Bell, 1897), p.24.
15. H. Dorey, 'Soane as Collector' in P. Thornton & H. Dorey (eds), *A Miscellany of Objects From Sir John Soane's Museum* (London: Laurence King, 1992), p.122.
16. For catalogues of the Jennings sales between 1778 and 1779, see British Museum, TY19/59-64.
17. *A catalogue of the superb furniture, valuable library of books, fine paintings, superb sculptures and a variety of other articles: which will be sold by auction, by Mr. Robins, of Warwick House ..., by order of the Right Honourable Lord Berwick* (London: printed by T. Brettell, 1827). Sir John Soane's Museum, Sale catalogue 1827:07:30-08:20.
18. Roberts, *Memorials of Christies*, p.6.
19. BM TY 19/129. *A Catalogue of the capital, well-known and truly valuable collection of antique statues, bustos, aegyptian and other vases, bas-reliefs, &c. (including a few capital pictures) ... The property of a noble earl, deceased, which will be sold by auction, by Mr Christie, at Roehampton, on Tuesday April 7th 1801* (London: J. Smeeton, 1801).
20. Wall, 'The English Auction', p.15.

21. Wall, 'The English Auction', p.14.
22. Wall, 'The English Auction', p.10.
23. See J. Scott, *The Pleasures of Antiquity: British Collections of Greece and Rome* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003).
24. *A catalogue of the magnificent and unique collection of Italian bronzes, the property of Mr. Deville; which will be sold by auction, by Messrs. Christie & Manson, ... Friday, May the 15th, 1835* (London: 1835). Sir John Soane's Museum Sale Catalogue 1835:05:15-16.
25. *A catalogue of a small assemblage of capital and valuable marbles recently consigned from Italy. Christies Saturday May 31st 1800* (London, 1800). British Museum, TY 19/108.
26. (Catalogue wrongly printed as 1776 on cover) *Preserved part of museum of pictures by masters, antique bustos, marbles & bronzes etc. Messers Christie & Ansell 26-27 Feb & 1 Mar 1779* (London, 1779). British Museum, TY 19/64.
27. *A Catalogue of most noble, capital, and valuable collection of Ancient marble statues and bustos, ... The property of the right hon. Lord Cawdor collected with great taste and liberality during several years residence in Italy. Skinner and Dyke 5-6 June 1800* (London, 1800). British Museum, TY 19/109.
28. B. Redford, *Dilettanti: The Antic and the Antique in 18th Century England* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008).
29. Thomas Jenkins to Charles Townley, 27th August 1774. British Museum, TY7/336. Quoted in Coltman, *Classical Sculpture and the Culture of Collecting*, p.254-255.
30. Cook, *The Townley Marbles*, p.15.
31. Thomas Jenkins to Charles Townley, 6 June 1775. British Museum, TY 7/346.
32. Coltman, *Classical Sculpture and the Culture of Collecting*, p.255.
33. Quoted in I. Jenkins, 'The Past is a Foreign Country, Thomas Hope's Collection of Antiquities', in D. Watkin & P. Hewat-Jaboor (eds), *Thomas Hope: Regency Designer* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008), p.107-129.
34. Wall, 'English Auction', p.10.
35. See R. Guilding, *Owning the Past: I. Jenkins, Archaeologists and Aesthetes in the Sculpture Galleries of the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 1992); H. Dorey, T. Drysdale, S. Palmer & F. Sands, *Death and Memory: Soane and the Architecture of Legacy* (London: Pimpernel Press, 2015).
36. Horace Walpole to Lady Ossory, 16 July 1793, in *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 34, p.184.
37. L. Peltz, *Facing the Text: Extra-Illustration, Print Culture and Society in Britain, 1769-1840* (Manchester & San Marino CA: Manchester University Press & Huntington Library Press, 2017), p.201.
38. I. Jenkins, 'Contemporary Minds: Sir William's Affair with Antiquity', in I. Jenkins & K. Sloan (eds) *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and His Collection* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), p.40-64.
39. Troy Bickham, *Savages within the Empire: Representations of American Indians in Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p.45. I am thankful for Dr Madeleine Pelling for sharing this with me from her forthcoming monograph.
40. See K. W. Christian, *Empire Without End: Antiquities Collections of Renaissance Rome, c. 1350-1527* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010); Bignamini & Hornsby, *Digging and Dealing in Eighteenth Century Rome*.
41. D. Kurtz, *The Reception of Classical Art in Britain: An Oxford Story of Plaster Casts from Antique Sculptures* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2000), p.19.
42. Kurtz, *Reception of Classical Art in Britain*, 19.
43. J. Moore, "'Marble mad and very extravagant": Henry Ince Blundell and the politics of cultural reputation in Britain and Italy' in R. Lorelli and F. O'Gorman (eds), *Britain and Italy in the*

Long Eighteenth Century: Literary and Art Theories (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2010), p.245.

44. See theories of object itineraries in R. Joyce & S. Gillespie, *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice* (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2015); H. P. Hahn & H. Weiss (eds), *Mobility Meaning and the Transformation of Things: Shifting Contexts of Material Culture Through Time and Space* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2013).

45. For more information on the Townley Archive, see S. Hill, *Catalogue of The Townley Archive at the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 2002).

46. See D. Willkins, 'Reading Words and Images in the Description(s) of Sir John Soane's Museum', *Architectural History* 4:1 (2016) p.1-22.

47. D. Noy, *Dr Johnson's Friend and Robert Adam's Client, Topham Beauclerk* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), p.XV.

48. *The Gazetteer*, May 25 1780. Quoted in Noy, *Topham Beauclerk*, p.127.

49. J. Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, 2nd edn (London, 1787), p.422.

50. A. Aymonino, L. Gwynn & M. Modolo, 'Richard Topham and his Collection' in A. Aymonino, L. Gwynn & M. Modolo, *Paper Palaces: the Topham Collection as a Source for British Neoclassicism* (Eton: Eton College, 2013), p.10.

51. Will of Richard Topham of New Windsor, Berkshire. National Archives, PROB 11/641/38.

52. D. Noy, 'Antiquities Collection of Richard Topham and Topham Beauclerk', *Journal of the History of Collecting* 25:2 (2013), p.185-193.

53. Noy, 'Collection of Richard Topham and Topham Beauclerk', p.188.

54. Townley, Parlour Catalogue. British Museum TY 12/3.

55. British Museum, TY 12/3.

56. Townley, Parlour Catalogue (1804), British Museum GR 2.

57. See C. Barron, 'Latin inscriptions and the eighteenth-century art market', in A. Guzman & J. Martinez (eds) *Amino Decipiendi? Rethinking Fakes and Authorship in Classical, Late Antique, & Early Christian Works* (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2018), p.265-284.

58. A full description of Townley's display and the density of objects on show can be found in J. T. Smith's account of visiting Park Street in J. T. Smith, *Nollekens and His Times* (London: Century Hutchinson, 1986), p. 166-168.

59. See Dorey, 'Soane as Collector', p.122.

60. J. Ingamells, *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy, 1701-1800* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997) p. 176-177.

61. British Museum, Inventory number: 1805,0703.6.

62. *A Catalogue of ... The property of the right Hon. Lord Cawdor, collected with great taste and liberality during several years residence in Italy*, Skinner and Dyke, Thursday 5th and Friday 6th June 1800 (London, 1800), British Museum, TY 19/109.

63. E. Angelicoussis, *The Woburn Abbey Collection of Classical Antiquities* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1992).

64. Sir John Soane's Museum, Inventory number: L101. T. Smith, 'Myth, cult and performance: Sir John Soane's Cawdor Vase' *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 57:1 (2014), p.96-123.

65. J. Britton, *Union of Architecture Sculpture and Painting: Exemplified by a series of illustrations and accounts of the house and galleries of John Soane* (Privately printed: London, 1827), p.51.

66. J. Soane, *Description of the House and Museum of the North Side of Lincoln's Inn Fields, the Residence of Sir John Soane* (London: printed by James Moyes, 1830) pl. 11.

67. Soane, *Description*, p.19.

68. *A catalogue of the valuable and highly interesting collection of painted Greek vases of Sir Henry Charles Englefield, bart. Deceased, ... which will be sold by auction, by Mr. Christie, at his Great Room, in Pall Mall, on Thursday, March 6th, 1823, and two following days*, (London, 1823). Sir John Soane's Museum, Sale Catalogue 1823:03:06.08.

69. Willkens, 'Reading Words and Images', p.2.

70. J. Soane & B. Hofland, *Description of the House and Museum on the North Side of Lincoln's Inn Fields, the Residence of Sir John Soane ... with Graphic Illustrations and Incidental Details* (London: printed by Levey, Robson, and Franklyn, 1835), p.9.

DR. NICOLE COCHRANE is 2020–2021 British Association of Victorian Studies & British Association of Romantic Studies Nineteenth-Century Matters Fellow at the University of Exeter and Postdoctoral Research Assistant at the University of Hull. She was awarded her AHRC-funded PhD, titled 'Ancient Sculptures and the Narrative of Collecting: Legacy and Identity in Museum Space, 1770-1900,' from the University of Hull in 2019. Her research concerns the histories of archaeology, collecting and the museum and particularly on the effects of collection and display on the reception of art.