

NOTES ON
THE SCULPTURE
COLLECTION
OF WILTON HOUSE



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INTRODUCTION

The sculpture of the Greeks and Romans was one of the greatest artistic achievements of the ancient world. Excavation of the remains of their civilization from all over Europe and the Middle East have revealed many examples of it and led to an explosion of interest in it. The sculpture collection at Wilton House was one of the first in this country, preceded on this scale only by those made in the seventeenth century by Thomas Howard, 14th Earl of Arundel, George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham and Charles 1st. It was collected by Thomas Herbert, the 8th Earl of Pembroke, between 1710 and 1730. By the time he died in 1733 the Wilton collection comprised around three hundred and forty sculptures.

The range of styles and subjects of the sculptures in the collection is wide but portrait busts are particularly well represented. Not all of them are ancient. A number of very fine ancient portrait busts of men, women and children were excavated. But they became much sought after by collectors and the demand exceeded the supply. This led to a large number of busts being made from the 16th century onwards that were 'after the antique', which was not always explained to the buyer.

Peter Stewart's *A Catalogue of the Sculpture Collection at Wilton House* (Archaeopress Publishing Ltd 2020) is a monumental achievement. His meticulous research while compiling it took advantage of online resources never before available. The resulting catalogue not only reveals the history of the collection but also makes it possible to know more about the sculptures in it than ever before. All the information in these notes is taken from it, often word for word, with the author's permission. The fifteen sculptures included are a representative sample. In the title of each work, following the catalogue, the most likely subject is in brackets where it differs from the attribution of the 8th Earl. The selection of works to be included has been made with the route in mind usually taken by visitors on a guided tour of the house.

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* Denotes wholly or partially ancient

THE NORTH ENTRANCE HALL

1 Colossal Statue of Hercules Cat 8*



Proposal for dating: First or second century AD with substantial 16th or 17th century additions.

The statue represents the classical hero Hercules with his club, draped in the skin of the Nemean lion and holding the apples of the Hesperides. Killing the lion and bringing back its skin and getting three of the golden apples that grew on a very well guarded tree in the far west were two of his twelve 'labours'.

The statue was bought by the 8th Earl of Pembroke from Cardinal Mazarin's collection in Paris. The Cardinal left his collection to be divided between his nephew and his niece. The niece's husband in a fit of misplaced religious zeal took a hammer to some of the statues of naked men and women in the collection.

Signs of the damage he did can be found in a number of Wilton pieces. Some are perhaps to be seen in this one, for example in the upper legs and the abdomen.

The head and the bulk of the torso are ancient, other parts are 16th and 17th century additions by a restorer who may have used a similar complete statue found in Rome in 1546 as a model.

In 1762 a party of three Cherokee Indians were being shown round Wilton House on their way to London after landing in Plymouth. They were very pleased with everything they saw at the house until they saw this statue with its uplifted club, which they found so frightening that they immediately asked to leave

2 Colossal Statue of Apollo Cat 9*



Proposal for dating: c.First century or first half of second century AD, with seventeenth century additions.

The statue represents the God Apollo.

It was excavated in c.1700 from the ruins of ancient Rome. It was sent to France from Italy in 1715 as a gift to Louis XIV by Cardinal Albani and after the King's death that year it was acquired by the 8th Earl. It was highly admired in the 18th century.

The lower limbs are a restoration done in Rome perhaps by the sculptor Angelo de Rossi soon after it was excavated. The laurel leaves and support were also added then.

The statue is Roman in the style of a famous Greek original from the late classical period of Greek sculpture.

It was probably originally in a Roman public space such as a bath complex or a sanctuary.

THE NORTH CLOISTER

3 Colossal Bust of Alexander the Great Cat 56



Proposal for dating:
Early to mid-seventeenth
century.

Alexander the Great (356-323BC) conquered almost all of the world known to the Greeks and died tragically young. He quickly became a legend and his portraits were idealised.

This colossal bust is clearly recognisable from Alexander's image on ancient coins.

It was once thought to be ancient but the helmet, Gorgon's head on the chest and the deeply drilled hair are

characteristic of 'statues after the antique' produced in the 17th century.

Alexander even in his own lifetime was believed to be superhuman and so over life-sized busts of him, like this one, have always been considered appropriate.

4 Bust of 'Drusus' (The Emperor Tiberius) Cat 79*



Proposal for dating c13-37 AD.

Despite its crude naming from the 8th Earl's time as 'Drusus' on the left upper arm this is clearly a portrait of the second Roman Emperor, Tiberius. He succeeded Augustus in 14 AD.

It closely resembles others made of him during his lifetime or soon after his death.

The base is of coloured marble in the typical style of those in the collection of Cardinal Mazarin in Paris, much of which was bought by

the 8th Earl when it was put up for sale by his family.

The whole was given its uniformly modern, highly polished appearance during the restorations carried out after it was first excavated, especially on the left side of the head.

Contemporary portraits of this kind were highly idealised but preserved individual elements which allow them to be identified.

5 Bust of 'Messalina' (A Woman in Roman Style) Cat 82



Proposal for dating: c. first half of the seventeenth century.

A modern date is suggested by its style, technique and state of preservation. But it draws very plausibly and skillfully on ancient sources.

This seems to be a portrait of an empress or woman of the imperial court and is of an unusually young woman for such a portrait.

The surviving piece of ancient sculpture it most resembles is not one of Messalina, the notorious third wife of the emperor

Claudius who was murdered in 48 AD but one of Julia the daughter of the Emperor Titus (65-91 AD) which was made at the time of her early death.

Its alabaster base resembles silk and the style of its hair is right for this period.

She has perhaps been idealised to resemble the goddess Venus, as was the bust of Julia now in Copenhagen.

6 Bust of 'Saloninus Valerianus' (a Roman Girl) Cat 104*



Proposal for dating: early third century AD. Bust c second to third century AD.

This characterful head of a young girl has been thought to be one of the most finely executed sculptures in the collection.

The base is an ancient survival that once supported a different head.

The portrait was intended to be adorned with real earrings.

This was probably a funerary memorial to a girl

who died tragically young.

It has a clearly feminine hairstyle so it is surprising that the 8th Earl identified it as a Roman emperor.

The confusion may have occurred from its hairstyle resembling the style of that emperor's mother, which the Earl was familiar with from his coin collection.

7 Small Statue of a 'Queen of the Amazons' (Fallen Amazon) Cat 11*



Proposal for dating:
probably c first century
BC or 1st century AD.

The Amazons in mythology were a race of female warriors, always situated on the borders of the known world.

Ancient artists were attracted by the contrast between their feminine beauty and their manly fighting.

Several drawings survive of this distinctive piece of sculpture before it was restored, showing that the torso, parts of the legs and shield are original.

It was singled out as one of the treasures of Cardinal Mazarin's collection and was thought at the time of its acquisition by the 8th Earl to depict Thalestris, the queen of the Amazons and to have been the work of the famous 5th century BC Greek sculptor Phidias.

The Renaissance restoration was extremely sensitive to the original form of the figure and head that were inspired by a series of battlegroups on a monument dating from about 200 BC on the Athenian Acropolis. The remnant of a horse's hoof behind the shield shows that the Amazon was once part of a larger sculpture.

8 Altar of Bacchus (Roman altar with archaistic relief) Cat 130*



Proposal for dating: c. late first century BC to start of first century AD.

The close similarity between this altar and another excavated in 1846 from the theatre at Caere (modern Cerveteri), a town 60km from Rome, suggests it may also have come from there. If so, it would have been one of a pair placed at the front of the stage, as supports for a statue or with metal tops to hold burnt offerings.

The carvings on it depict Dionysus/Bacchus, God of the theatre and wine, holding a wine cup and his distinctive staff, accompanied by two Horae –

goddesses of the seasons. The one in front is wearing the heavy clothes of winter, the one behind the light chiton and cloak worn in summer. Her foot almost touches a panther, an animal often associated with Dionysus, a god whose wildness was very close to nature.

The inscription carved in large archaic Greek capitals round the crown of the altar is a cleverly written, modern addition, like the one on the Mantheos relief (Cat 129). It translates “Let us sing Dionysus of beauteous form, the reveller, the yellow haired one.”

It particularly interested the 8th Earl and may even have been added to encourage him to buy.

9 Strigillated Sarcophagus with a Portrait Medallion Cat 134*



Proposal for dating: 3rd century AD.

This is one of five unbroken sarcophagi (stone coffins) from the very large communal tomb known as the Columbarium (dovecote-tomb) of Livia on the Via Appia just outside ancient Rome, which contained various monuments of former slaves of the Imperial household.

See also Cat 138 in the East Cloister. They were excavated in 1726 and bought by the 8th Earl using the 3rd Duke of Beaufort as an intermediary. The double portrait on the tondo on its side was roughed out (as was usual) at the time of manufacture and completed when the owner or purchaser required it.

It depicts an active man of affairs holding a scroll and his wife, who is embracing him. Her hair style is typical of the third quarter of the third century. The images of lions on the end panels were intended to show the destructive power of death and the theatrical masks below the tondo recall that "all life is a stage". There is no inscription to indicate who they were or which of them was dead at the time of the sarcophagus's first use. It was designed to be placed against the wall of a tomb. On its front is typical 'strigillated' fluting, so named because it resembles the strigils (scrapers) used by athletes to clean themselves.

THE EAST CLOISTER

10 Small Statue of a 'Faunus Looking behind Him' (Satyr with Panther) Cat 12*



Proposal for dating: the head and other restorations are late 16th/early 17th century but the torso is plausibly ancient and could be dated to c. first century BC to second century AD.

Satyrs were creatures of the wilderness, half human and half-beast.

The head is much restored and with its elongated ears, tiny goat-horns above the forehead and pine crown is a conventional addition. A number of statues of this type have survived – in some he holds in his right hand a throwing stick. He is depicted here accompanied by a wild animal and twisting as he dances.

Such statues were typically used in the Roman world as decorations for gardens. This one was put out into the garden at Wilton during or after the

Second World War and returned to the cloisters around 2007.

11 Statue of 'Cupid breaking his bow' (Cupid stringing his bow) Cat10*



Proposal for dating: Torso and possibly head c. first century BC to second century AD, restorations c. early 17th century.

The statue represents Cupid, son of Aphrodite the goddess of love, stringing his bow. When his arrows hit someone they inevitably fell in love.

In earlier times it was thought this piece represented Cupid breaking his bow, as he no longer needed it when he had grown up and was about to marry Psyche.

This was a very popular subject in the ancient world and some forty-four statues of this type survive.

This one was in the collection of Cardinal Mazarin and suffered some damage from his nephew as did others in this collection.

The legs and plinth are restored. The torso and head are ancient but the head originally belonged to a different statue.

Sculpture of this kind was then regarded as appropriate for villas, houses and baths. This one in recent decades stood in the garden before being cleaned and returned to the cloister at Wilton around 2007.

12 Bust of Julius Caesar Cat 73



Proposal for dating:
head and bust c.
sixteenth or seventeenth
century.

This sculpture is made
of alabaster and the bust
is veneered with finely
coloured marbles. The
name IUL.CAESAR,
neatly carved at the top
of the bust, might
predate the arrival of the
bust at Wilton.

It came from the palazzo
in Naples of Giuseppe
Valetta. His collection
was imported to London
and sold there in 1720,
just before the bursting
of the South Sea Bubble.
After this its purchaser
sold it, along with a

portrait of Homer (Cat43), in a forced sale at a bargain price to the 8th Earl. It appears in the 1723 catalogue described as the only original Julius Caesar portrait.

It broadly resembles ancient portraits that can be reliably identified as of Julius Caesar but the techniques used in its carving, especially of the eyes, are in the early modern style.

13 Votive Relief of 'Mantheos' Cat 129*



Proposal for dating: first century BC to first century AD; the inscription c AD 1700-1730.

The figures are carved in relief in an archaic style. Zeus, who can be identified by the eagle in his hand, waits to receive an offering from a young man, who is washing his hands before putting the offering onto the incense burner between them.

This imitates similar reliefs that have been found in ancient Athens and Sparta but it is very close indeed in style to reliefs which can be dated to the Roman period. They were popular garden ornaments in ancient Rome and this one probably like them came from there.

A paper impression taken from this relief in the 1690s survives. It includes a record of its original, unintelligible inscription, subsequently erased. The present inscription is written in an archaic style with the even lines reading backwards (known as boustrophedon – like an ox turning round in a field when ploughing). It is clearly a clever forgery added to increase the attractiveness of the relief to collectors such as the 8th Earl.

It reads: Mantheos (son of) Aithos gives thanks to Zeus for his victory in the boys' pentathlon.

14 Roman Sarcophagus with Representation of the Myth of Triptolemos. Cat 133*



Proposal for dating c 150-170 AD.

An ancient inscription has been carved across the lower border of the lid and upper border of the chest. It reads: To the Gods of the departed to Aurelius Epaphroditus her husband, Antonia Valeria set this up. Aurelius Epaphroditus was possibly a successful freedman. He is otherwise unknown.

This elaborately carved sarcophagus was found somewhere in the Mediterranean c 1642. Its marble has been identified as coming from South Italy and the sarcophagus may well come from there.

The relief on the front depicts the myth of Triptolemos who was the infant prince of Eleusis. Demeter, the goddess of crops, in gratitude for the sanctuary offered to her by the city, cured him of a grave illness. She taught him the art of agriculture and made him immortal. The relief depicts this story in four scenes. From left to right:- Persephone, Demeter's daughter, is being released from the underworld by Hecate who was associated with ghosts and witchcraft; Persephone holding an ear of wheat is seen with her mother Demeter and Bacchus who was associated with birth and death and the mystery cults celebrated at Eleusis; Triptolemos as a grown man, holding a basket of grain on his shoulder and ready to sow it with Persephone's approval and finally a group of five deities facing forwards.

15 Bust of 'Scipio Asiaticus' (a Roman Man) Cat 71



Proposal for dating: c. first half of the seventeenth century.

This is a very skillfully executed and sensitive portrait of a plump, middle-aged man.

The 8th Earl identified it as being a famous general of the late Roman Republic as it resembles other busts of that period. But the length of the locks and the realistic modelling of the facial features are closer to later private portraits from 70-90AD or a little after.

The fresh appearance of the carving, especially of the hair, strongly suggests that this is a modern copy of an ancient original. For example, its good humoured or ironic expression is very like a portrait in the Capitoline Museum in Rome which can be dated to c.120AD.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING:

- A Catalogue of the Sculpture Collection at Wilton House* P Stewart 2020
- Ancient Marbles in Great Britain* A Michaelis 1882
- Looking at Greek and Roman Sculpture: A Guide to Terms, Styles and Techniques* IB Grossman 2006
- The Art of Ancient Greece: Sources and Documents* JJ Pollitt, 1965
- The Art of Rome c.753 BC-AD 337: Sources and Documents* JJ Pollitt, 1966
- Ancient Writers on Greek Sculpture* H Stuart Jones, 1895
- The Art of the Romans* JMC Toynbee 1965
- Roman Sculpture* DEE Kleiner 1994
- Roman Portraits* Preface L Goldscheider Phaidon 1940
- Greek and Roman Portrait Sculpture* RP Hinks 2nd ed 1976
- Greek and Roman Portraits* S Walker 1995
- Roman Art (Greece and Rome New Surveys in the Classics no. 34)* P Stewart 2004
- Mythological Figures and Portraits: The Miller Collection of Roman Sculpture*
R Brilliant 2004
- Wilton House Guide: A Handbook for Visitors* Capt NR Wilkinson 1908
- The Pleasures of Antiquity: British Collectors of Greece and Rome* J Scott 2003