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Zoltán Suba
(Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest)

MASTER AND DISCIPLE

Bertel Thorvaldsen's Private Collection and Its Impact on Neoclassicism

Abstract

At the birth of archeology as a new science, Neoclassicism appeared on the stage of decorative and visual arts as well as that of architecture. The fascination with the rediscovered artifacts of antiquity led artists not to just collect them, but also to utilize them to rethink the legacy of Classical art and create something new out of it. One of the most admired masters of Neoclassicism, the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, had his own collection of antiquities which is now preserved in the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen. In the following I will attempt to capture the impact that these artifacts and plaster casts had on his work, and also point out how important his role was in the education of apprentices during his Roman period. To demonstrate its significance, I will turn to his Hungarian apprentice, István Ferenczy, and drawings, statues, and letters to connect both the master and the disciple to the ancient past.

Keywords: Thorvaldsen, classicism, plaster casts, fragments, Ferenczy

To sufficiently articulate the significance of Thorvaldsen's collection of antiques and the impact it had on his art, it is first indispensable to examine his connection to antiquity itself. Most probably he encountered ancient statues for the first time in the Royal Danish Academy of Arts, where he had been admitted in 1781 at the age of 11. During the second phase of their education, students were required to make drawings based on plaster casts of ancient statues (Jørnæs 2011: 15–17), of which Copenhagen had only a few at the end of the 1700s.

According to Nicolai Jonge's inventory, which he had maintained until his death in 1789, the Academy's plaster cast collection consisted of only twenty items, some of which were in pieces (Jørnæs 1970: 52). Thus, it is probable that the person who inspired Thorvaldsen's later habit of collecting antiques was the painter Nicolai Abraham Abildgaard, who became the master of the young apprentice in 1787. Abildgaard also had a small collection of coins and medals (Fejfer, Melander 2003: 9). Abildgaard likewise had another role in establishing a connection between Thorvaldsen and antiquity: he presumably introduced Thorvaldsen to the professor of sculpture Johannes Wiedewelt, who along with Abilgaard was the most important scholar of Classicist theory in Denmark. Wiedewelt's work entitled *Tanker om Smagen udi Kunstnerne* (Reflections on Taste and the Arts) from 1762 shows the influence of the reflections and conclusions from Johann Joachim Winckelmann's highly influential book (Winckelmann 1756), and even though we do not find any of these titles among Thorvaldsen's library of more than 845 volumes (Jørnæs 1978: 41-60), it is certain he was well aware of these theorists' ideas. Regarding his library, it is worth mentioning that after he arrived in Rome, an increasingly systematic conception of collecting unfolded as his time there progressed: most of the titles show archeological and topographical interests, but books about mythology and numismatics can also be found beside the works of ancient authors and museum catalogs.

Without a doubt, the most significant individual to influence Thorvaldsen's desire to collect antiquities was the Danish archeologist Georg Zoëga, who mentored the young sculptor after his arrival in Rome. Although Thorvaldsen had theoretical training during his years of academic study, in Zoëga's opinion he lacked the qualities that an artist requires. To illustrate his stance, Bjarne Jørnæs cites (Jørnæs 2011: 35) Zoëga's letter that he wrote to Friedrich Münter:

> Our fellow countryman, Thorvaldsen, who is spending a week here with me before visiting the notable sights of this area is an excellent artist of great taste and feeling, but far too ignorant of everything that is outside art. Incidentally, it is very poor thinking by the Academy when they send people so very raw to Italy, where they must later waste so very much time learning things without which they cannot properly benefit from their stay here, and which they could have learned sooner and more easily before they went on their travels. Without knowing a word of Italian or French, without the slightest knowledge of history and mythology, how is it possible for an artist to study here as he should? Had they the knowledge, then they could perhaps do without the language, or had they the languages, then they could find books here to instruct them; but without both they are lost and do not know where to begin. In particular a sculp-

> tor, who has nothing to go by but the antiquities, is much at a loss. I do not demand that an artist must be a scholar, I do not even wish it; but he must at least have some sort of obscure idea of the name and significance of the things he sees. The rest can be supplemented by relations with scholars, but when in any discourse one must begin with the ABC, it soon becomes tiresome for both parties.

His words lead us to different conclusions. It seems Thorvaldsen arrived in Rome as a completely uneducated youngster, which is of course merely an exaggeration when judged by the standards of an old scholar. Even if there were rumors regarding Thorvaldsen's illiteracy (Fejfer, Melander 2003: 11), Zoëga's guidance was undoubtedly fruitful. Which pieces of the collection were the first, in what order they arrived, and how they got there we do not know, but a well-documented example from 1823 shows us his mature interest in antiquities and books, which was probably the fruit of Zoëga's mentorship. The Danish archeologist P. O. Brøndsted pledged his collection of coins and books until he could pay back the loan to Thorvaldsen: the hand-written contract from 26 May 1823 indicates that Thorvaldsen gave 2000 roman *scudi* to Brøndsted, who in return promised many boxes filled with coins, marble fragments, manuscripts, and books[1]. In the contract's appendix[2] we find the quantity of items in each box, and only a Campanian terracotta vase with two figures, a copy of a yellow Etruscan vase without figures, a terracotta sphinx, and a plaster cast of an Etruscan bronze statue are mentioned. Although Brøndsted asked Thorvaldsen in a letter in 1833 to at least send the books and manuscripts to him in Copenhagen, and that the coins should be brought back when Thorvaldsen returned to Denmark, the sculptor, although referring to a tight deadline, did not fulfill the archeologist's request. In his reply, Brøndsted expressed his doubts that Thorvaldsen was telling him the truth about the delay[3]. It seems that Thorvaldsen may have held back Brøndsted's collection[4] purposefully with the intention of founding his own museum (Brøndsted never got back his books or his coins)[5].

The growing recognition of Thorvaldsen's advanced artistic qualities certainly played a role in his increasing connection to antiquity and the enlarge-

1 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. 173a.
2 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. 173b.
3 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. m18 1833, no. 92.
4 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. 172-3.
5 The fact that Thorvaldsen never received the loan, and also that some of Brøndsted's coins disappeared during an 1829 robbery, undoubtedly influenced Thorvaldsen's decision to retain Brøndsted's collection.

ment of his collection, and this made it possible for him – as a foreigner, and not least as a Protestant – to be accepted by the Italian institutions of art and archeology. In 1808 he became a member of the papal academy of arts, the *Accademia di San Luca*, where he was elected professor of sculpture in 1812. Later, in 1827, he was elected director of the institute. For the purpose of increasing his collection, he used his connections to regularly visit archeological excavations in the Gulf of Naples and northern Italy. As a direct result of this, Thorvaldsen became a founding member of the *Institut für archäologische Korrespondenz* and became an honorary member of the *Accademia Romana di Archeologia* in 1817 (Fejfer, Melander 2003: 13). This needs no further explanation, yet it is important to remember that because of his status, Thorvaldsen was among the first scholars to find out about the latest discoveries in the excavations, and although he did not exercise absolute control over the fate of the artifacts that were discovered, due to his reputation he had the possibility to be the first to make use of their motifs, to restore them, or to purchase them. For Thorvaldsen, the restoration of antique artifacts was primarily a "professional obligation": we do not know whether he traded these items or not, as such works were commissioned by wealthy clients. Moreover, he considered restoration to be an especially thankless task that impinged on his self-esteem, because his contribution was not visible on the restored artifact. It remains uncertain whether he restored any of the items in his own collection or not (Fejfer, Melander 2003: 14).

THE COLLECTION

The installation of the collection of antiquities in the Thorvaldsen Museum leads us to some interesting conclusions regarding its former owner. The partitioning of the collection obviously evinces a conceptual intention which is not necessarily consequential. In other words, the artifacts that were Brøndsted's have been kept separate within the collection of coins, even if some parts of it demonstrate thematic, chronological, or geographical matches with Thorvaldsen's own coins. The displays of marble statues and fragments suggest a rather aesthetical arrangement; thematic cohesion emerges only accidentally in relation to a few items. Among the marble fragments, there are numerous pieces depicting limbs, various other body parts, and draperies that clearly served as the source of Thorvaldsen's collection of motifs. This in itself distinguishes it

from most collections of the time: it is a typical artist's collection, which does not necessarily rely on the completeness of the items or on the method with which they are displayed, but rather the artifacts are rendered *items for personal use*. The same goes for lanterns, gems, and tiny objects made of semi-precious stones, which are really special pieces, but due to their small size they would not be representative enough for contemporary collectors. It seems variety was also a motive behind the collection, but – just as in the cases of foot-, hand-, and drapery-fragments – the motifs and compositions of the gems and lanterns served as models for his own art.

The most pragmatically-motivated category is the plaster cast collection. While the value of marble fragments, gems, and medals is undeniable given their originality, the plaster casts clearly serve as a collection of motifs not only for Thorvaldsen but also for the apprentices working in his atelier. The casts considered as sources of inspiration came in handy not only during the making of his own statues, but were useful for restorations, since only a cast made after antique originals, or fragments carved on the basis of originals, can really replace the piece to be restored on a statue. It is important to note that these casts were made from the most precious works of the Farnese Collection, the Ludovisi Collection, and the Vatican Museum before Napoleon shipped them to Paris (Fejfer, Melander 2003: 24).

For the sake of completeness, a truly unique and unusual category in Thorvaldsen's collection, which has been discussed in greater detail by Karen Benedicte Busk-Jepsen (2018), cannot be ignored. Although I referred above to the lessons of installation, it actually praises the work of Ludvig Müller, the Museum's first director, who probably relied on Thorvaldsen's partitioning as well. Because of him, the collection has some pieces that were not displayed in the beginning, but which are nowadays available to the general public. In order to protect the reputation of the celebrated Danish sculptor, numerous works of art depicting erotic scenes and phallic symbols were censored. Understandably, despite their large numbers, the motifs of these objects were not utilized, and their "concealment" protected the sculptor's reputation, who after all had already been criticized for ignoring Northern mythology in his art.

THE COLLECTION AS A REPERTORY OF MOTIFS

It is not surprising that a style such as Classicism, which defines itself in reference to specific works, contains objects within its purview that bear obvious parallels to concrete foreshadowing, especially at a time when artistic training set the imitation of statues as a benchmark. As I pointed out in my introduction, this was no different in Thorvaldsen's early years. It may be surprising to know, however, that both when he first arrived in Rome and then later as an established artist, he often used the motifs of ancient artifacts, and in some cases recycled and expanded them. Jørgen Birkedal Hartmann's comprehensive monograph (Hartmann 1979) on antique motifs in the art of the Danish sculptor provides the most thorough overview. The author (beyond discussing the influence of artifacts from other collections) highlights the application of motifs from pieces in Thorvaldsen's own collection. At the level of praxis, the statue of *Jason*[6], which was a breakthrough in Thorvaldsen's life, can be seen as a practical realization of Winckelmann's conception. This is because there was no established sculptural style of depiction of the Argonaut leader that Thorvaldsen could have utilized, so he had to create the figure of the mythical hero based on other prefiguration. Polykleitos' Doryphoros (or its surviving Roman copy) must be considered as the "primordium" of the statue, which, with its *contrapposto*, the physique of the ideal man, has been a point of reference for centuries. It exerts its impact on *Jason* through the Mars statue of Villa Albani and the statue of Diomedes[7] currently in Munich (Hartmann 1979: 48–50). The evident compositional similarity thus helped Thorvaldsen only in his general portrayal of the hero, but the need for it to be recognizable also made the inclusion of the Golden Fleece essential. An obvious model seems to be the calyx crater on which Jason stands in front of Pelias in *contrapposto*, with a spear in his right hand and the Golden Fleece in his left: although the calyx crater is currently located in the Louvre[8], Thorvaldsen could have seen it before its arrival in Paris, and by blending it with the sculptural tradition of the hero, he was able to create his groundbreaking statue. Although Thorvaldsen did not yet have access to his own collection at the time of *Jason*'s making, it is worth considering the circumstances of its creation because it highlights not just the Danish

6 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A822.
7 Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek, München, inventory no. 304.
8 Louvre, Paris, inventory no. K 127.

sculptor's working method, but also the praxis of Classicism: combining the lessons of ancient masterpieces in order to build a bridge between antiquity and the present, as Frederike Brun wrote in a poem praising Thorvaldsen's statue (Brun 1803: 485–486).

The examination of plaster cast collection, units of body parts, draperies, and marble fragments serving as a repertory of motifs is problematic for several reasons. First, it is not known whether Thorvaldsen actually applied all of them or simply enriched this part of the collection in order to expand it. Secondly, even if he had used these fragments, they are so common that their identification is impossible, and would not introduce any novelty into the study of Classicist sculpture.

The variety of objects from his collection he employed, and the ingenuity of their application is even more interesting. One of these is the bust of Napoleon, made in 1830[9], which gained its final form after being anticipated in a different form. Since Thorvaldsen had never met Napoleon, a copy of his death mask[10], a portrait by Antoine-Denis Chaudet, and a coin by Jean-Bertrand Andrieu and Jean-Pierre Montagny[11] helped him create a credible portrait, as did those paintings and etchings which were being circulated at the time and that were accessible by Thorvaldsen. In terms of formation, Thorvaldsen had the possibility to access numerous portraits of Roman emperors, but in terms of composition we can point out some interesting antecedents from his collection. One of them is the portrait of Hadrian[12] that was made in the 18th century after an antique original. Other examples include some motifs from truly ancient lanterns (Fig. 1), which helped Thorvaldsen in setting the composition. From the Hadrian bust he made use of the small aegis which was always attached to the left shoulder; Thorvaldsen, however, placed it on the right one. The statue of Hadrian is standing on a globe that is held by an eagle with outstretched wings. Two lanterns[13] in his collections show a variation of this motif that was eventually used by the artist (Fig. 2): a depiction of the Jupiter-bearing eagle (Zamarovsky 1970: 244–245) on Thorvaldsen's statue that is similar to that of a Roman emperor raises Napoleon to the heights of Jupiter (Hartmann 1979: 84–88).

9 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A252, A732, A867, A909.
10 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. L652.
11 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. F105.
12 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. H1437.
13 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. H1144, H1145.

Antique fragments, as well as numerous plaster casts, helped Thorvaldsen with the sculptural articulation of harmonizing draperies and movements. On a Roman cameo fragment[14] depicting a dancing bacchante, her legs are in motion, and a drapery that follows might have served as a model for similar scenes in his own works: the vigorous grace of *Dancing Girl with a Panther*[15], the dynamism of figures on the rounded reliefs depicting the Muses[16], or the cavalcade of *Dancing Muses on Helikon*[17] can all justifiably be seen to have served as examples for the application of this ancient motif. However, it cannot be stressed enough that his adaptation is rarely unmediated, and I assume that a motif from an ancient object had often served as confirmation for the artist regarding the correct use of prefiguration as seen on contemporary – or recent – works of art. For this reason we cannot ignore Asmus Jacob Carsten's drawing[18] from 1793 as a source of inspiration for Thorvaldsen, either.

The Muses, by their very nature, provided additional inspiration for Thorvaldsen. In looking at the attributes of the plaster cast of the seated Urania statue[19], which has been dated to the 3rd century BC, it may have served as a model for making one of the Muse reliefs[20] mentioned above. Though Hartmann denies (Hartmann 1979: 82) that the parallel between the Urania statue and the seated figure in *Elisabeth Osterman-Tolstoy*[21] propounded by Elise Kai Sass (1957: 71–99) exists, suggesting that the Neapolitan *Agrippina* and Canova's *Letizia Ramolino Bonaparte* statues could be justifiably compared to the seated figure of the Russian countess[22], the idea of ancient prefiguration cannot be ruled out. On the one hand, the "case of *Jason*" showed how Thorvaldsen created his own version of the Argonaut leader by referring to various artworks while there were no concrete sculptural foreshadowings; on the other, Thorvaldsen could obviously have sought to apply a motif differently from the works

14 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. I2033.
15 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. C54.
16 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A328, A329, A330, A331, A332, A333, A334, A335, A336, A337.
17 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A341.
18 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. D815.
19 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. L42.
20 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A335.
21 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A167.
22 Although Hartmann does concede that the positions of the heads, arms, and legs differ between the two statues.

of his celebrated rival, Canova. Nor can the dichotomy of *imitation vs. copying* in Classicism be neglected: the goal is to bring something new to art through the imitation of ancient works. With this in mind, it could be understood why the works of Classicist sculptors resemble ancient compositions and motifs, and yet by comparing them, we find they differ in the details. They are similar and different at the same time.

It is worth observing the work of countless sculptors who appeared in Thorvaldsen's workshop. To what extent did they imbibe the style of their master's compositions, and can a concrete ancient foreshadowing be detected in their work? It is difficult to give an accurate answer to this question, as at least 189 sculptors and stonemasons worked for Thorvaldsen[23], and we still have no knowledge of the work of many of them to this day. By examining the oeuvre of the only Hungarian sculptor who turned up in his workshop, István Ferenczy, we can at least get some impressions about his master's influence. His sketches show that he enthusiastically drew the statues of the Vatican Museum[24], and thus it is natural that the portraits and busts which he carved in Thorvaldsen's atelier as an assistant testify to a thorough knowledge of Classicist portrait sculpture. Ferenczy's correspondence (Ferenczy 1912) and Thorvaldsen's accounts help to reconstruct the works on which the Hungarian artist labored, from which one can infer the source of inspiration for his own works. Among others he had worked on was the bust of *Miklós Esterházy*[25], the relief portrait of *Christina Alexandra Egypta Bonaparte*[26], and the statue of the *Shepherd Boy*[27]. Furthermore, Ferenczy mentions (Ferenczy 1912: 116) the relief of the *Entry of Alexander the Great into Babylon*[28] as one of the biggest works, and it is also regularly mentioned among the accounts of his Danish master. In terms of a more specific connection, Thorvaldsen's aforementioned *Elisabeth Osterman-Tolstoy* statue is noteworthy due to the fact that not only this work, but also the composition of the possible prefiguration, is so peculiar that it can provide an opportunity to compare it to other works. The seated statue of *Ferenc Kölcsey* is just as similar

23 See the archives of the museum: https://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/articles/thorvaldsens-assistants, accessed on 4.06.2020.

24 Hungarian National Gallery, Department of Prints and Drawings, Budapest, inventory no. 1902–782.

25 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A293.

26 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A726.

27 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A177.

28 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A503.

to the work of his Danish master, or to the statue of *Urania* in his collection, as it is to the figure of *Agrippina* in Naples. Compared to Thorvaldsen's work, the legs assume an inverted posture, depicting the poet with a parchment scroll worthy of the author of the Hungarian national anthem, so that an ancient motif that has been used many times before can become an original Classicist work of art.

One of the most interesting pieces of Ferenczy's work is the sketch[29] in which he sincerely confesses his spiritual struggles (Fig. 3): should he travel home or stay in Rome?[30] Observing each attribute and composition can facilitate interpretation: on the left, in the foreground of ancient ruins, a pensive figure is sitting on a ram-headed sarcophagus surrounded by a sword, a crown, and a scepter, while on the other side, against an empty background, Janus calls the artist into the unknown, at whose feet lies a tombstone (DM FERENCZYUS). This seems to resemble the dilemma of a mediocre but acclaimed foreign artist as he considers whether to remain in Rome or return home to the unknown. The *topos* of the pensive artist and the genius rushing to his aid is not new in the fine arts, but in this case an obvious foreshadowing may also come into play. Thorvaldsen's relief[31] from 1808 offers an opportunity to compare it to Ferenczy's sketch (Fig. 4), not only by theme but in terms of expression: at the feet of the figure embodying art, attributes aid interpretation, and she rests her head on one hand, awaiting the inspiration that comes from the chalice of "enlightenment" through the mediation of the genius of light. In addition to the similarities between the two scenes, the inscription on the stele-like stone block in Thorvaldsen's work, which can also be rhymed with the one in Ferenczy's drawing, cannot be ignored. Almost twenty years later, this motif was almost completely adopted by Ferenczy when he modeled the plaster sketches of the reliefs designed for the monument to King Matthias (Fig. 5). The daguerreotype of *Matthias's Apotheosis*, which has unfortunately been subsequently destroyed, was published by Simon Meller in his monograph (Meller 1905), which is the basis of our comparison. Ferenczy places the figure of the winged genius on the other side; his formation is less plastic and clumsy, and with his left hand he pours from the chalice of "enlightenment" into the bowl placed on the stone block. He even made use of the caption, this time in Hungarian: *A lángésztől jön*

29 Hungarian National Gallery, Department of Prints and Drawings, Budapest, inventory no. 1952–4680, 66.

30 For further examination see: Cifka 1978.

31 Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inventory no. A518.

a világosság (*The light comes from the genius*). In front of him, however, we see Matthias and the group of those who mourn him, so the artistic inspiration has been replaced by the act of transcendence in Ferenczy's work.

The influence of the Danish master is also reflected in the development of Ferenczy's collection. There is no information on the motives behind the selection of, or how Ferenczy obtained, ancient artifacts in Rome. Given that we have no knowledge of such intentions from before (which could be explained by his financial situation), however, it is sure that not only Thorvaldsen but Canova, too, had influenced the Hungarian artist to collect antiquities. After more than a hundred years since Ferenczy's collection was placed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, it has been proven that the majority of its works are mostly Renaissance artifacts. This reveals that Ferenczy apparently did not have access to genuine ancient pieces due to his financial situation and his low status, and also that, because of his lack of education, he really considered some of the pieces in his collection to be ancient: his *Neptune* statue[32] appears as a piece from "Hellenic prehistory" on his own list, despite the fact that we now know that it was made in the first half of the 16th century. He likewise claimed that his *Mounted Warrior* equestrian statue[33] was an antique, but it was in fact made in the early 16th century and now attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. Bearing in mind the danger of speculation, I assume that Ferenczy may have been misled by the archaic design of the statues and their stylized details. Nonetheless, the collection had a category that included truly antique pieces, which were however lost under unclear circumstances after the collection was acquired in the 1920s. Although the quality of the archive photos made from the collection does not allow us to make clear dating, it is nonetheless still apparent that those pieces are by no means representative of what the Danish master had. Compared to his master, Ferenczy's much more modest collection clearly shows the difference in their intentions: the Hungarian sculptor's collection is not an *artist's collection*, as there are no usable and detailed body parts and draperies, despite the fact that he would have greatly needed them considering his art. Antiques, and statues considered to be antique, did not serve as a compositional example for his oeuvre, either, and Ferenczy himself seems to have sought inspiration for his own works more from his Danish master, as well as perhaps from Canova and from the famous statues in the Vatican Museum. When articulating his inten-

32 Museum of Fine Arts, Department of Old Sculptures, Budapest, inventory no. 5307.
33 Museum of Fine Arts, Department of Old Sculptures, Budapest, inventory no. 5362.

tion to collect, his patriotic zeal cannot be neglected, either, by which he aimed to create Hungary's artistic education and to enrich his country's art treasures – and in this, he intended to play a prominent role (perhaps too prominent).

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