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## LUXURY SOUVENIR OR PRECIOUS ORIGINAL

The Case of the Bronze Tripod  
from the Real Museo Borbonico

### **Abstract**

A newly discovered and unique exchange of correspondence between Baron Franz von Koller and the competent Neapolitan authorities about making a copy of bronze tripod which is exhibited in the royal museum in Naples captures what exactly was necessary to build a collection of antiquities at the turn of two epochs, while abiding by the official protocols and observing royal decrees. Baron Koller served as a general intendant in Naples between 1815 and 1826 and in this time, this educated diplomat became an accomplished collector of antiques and an amateur archeologist. Although he did not obtain the required permission, the inventory of his collection actually includes two different copies of bronze tripods “created after the original from the Real Museo Borbonico”. Koller’s desire to own the most accurate copy of the exhibited piece proves that it was not supposed to be a mere showpiece that catches the general atmosphere but a serious collectable original item.

**Keywords:** collecting antiquities, bronze tripod, Franz von Koller, Royal Bourbon Museum

The rediscovery of the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century was a sensation. The sudden archaeological boom led to an increased interest in ancient culture and antiques; suddenly, everyone wanted to have a piece of Pompeii at home. However, the collectors market of the time

was open only to the most influential and wealthy figures (with some antiques remaining out of reach even to them), so the majority of the public began to look for various collectable alternatives. Many artists responded quickly and flexibly to this demand and sculptors specialized in creating these fashionable or hard-to-find antiques. As a result, in addition to authentic antiques, objects that only served to replace or supplement the originals started appearing in many museum and private collections. However, there are also works of art among them which, with their luxurious execution and unusual way of acquisition, reveal further motivations of the collectors of that time. The State Archives of Naples holds proof of one such influential and powerful collector and an enigmatic bronze tripod<sup>1</sup>.

On November 16, 1823, Baron Franz von Koller (1767–1826) sent a letter addressed to Marquis Giuseppe Ruffo (1771–1839), the director of the Royal Secretariat and Ministry of the Royal Palace in Naples, in which he requests permission to copy a bronze tripod on display in the exhibition spaces of the Real Museo Borbonico in Naples. In this letter, Koller expresses his ambition to create a perfect copy of this bronze tripod and politely asks the marquis for his intercession with the director of the royal museum in Naples.

It may seem like a very ordinary message, just one of the many bureaucratic formalities common at this time. However, as the following correspondence shows, Koller's request triggered a discussion in the highest state and institutional circles, revealing unexpected links and a new understanding of the significance of antiques and their copies for collectors.

In the following letter, marked as “confidential”, Marquis Ruffo from the Royal Secretariat asks the director of the museum in Naples, Michele Arditi (1746–1838), whether the exhibited piece of the bronze tripod had already been published or not. In his reply to the marquis, Michele Arditi stated and stressed by underlining the title of the publication, the name of its author, the volume, page numbers and also the illustration, where the requested tripod can be found.

In one of the following letters, secretary Ruffo consults with Carlo M. Rossini (1748–1836), bishop of the Pozzuoli cathedral and chairman of the Royal Bourbon Society, and they debate about the reasons the permission to copy the tripod should not be granted to Koller. Ruffo emphasizes that it is not a sculp-

1 Archivio di Stato di Napoli (ASN), Ministero degli affari interni, Inventario II – Antichità e Belle Arti, bb. 1966–2147, b. 2020, fasc. 67, Permesso al Barone Koller di far eseguire il disegno di un tripode di bronzo, 1824.

ture or a bas-relief, but an object which can be captured in drawing along with all its dimensions, so it is possible to use a drawing to make any kind of copy or imitation that Koller desires. Furthermore, the marquis fears that frequent copying may result in damages or unsolicited changes, especially harm to the patina. Lastly, he feels it is a problem that the object would be absent from the exposition of the royal museum for several days.

This letter is then followed by the final preserved official document which communicates to Arditì the permission to let Koller copy the desired tripod only in drawn form. A preserved inventory of Koller's collection, which was compiled after his death by Raffaele Gargiulo (1785–1870), reveals, however, that Baron Koller's wish to own a copy of the famous bronze tripod from the royal collections was eventually fulfilled<sup>2</sup>.

What did the powerful delegate of the Emperor of Austria need a copy of an exceedingly valuable tripod for? Why did he even have to make a request to create a copy? Why did the director of the museum mention the tripod's publishing? What did the museum look like at the time? Why did Koller even want a copy made from the original and was not satisfied with the supply of upscale copies on the market? And which tripod is he specifically concerned with in the first place? (Fig. 1)

Franz von Koller was not only a prominent figure of Austrian politics in the post-Napoleonic era but above all a significant collector of antiquities, an amateur archaeologist, and an enlightened erudite. In 1815–1818 and 1821–1826, he served as a general intendant in Naples, where he oversaw the restoration of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the return of the Bourbons to the throne. He could not have wished for a more convenient time and place for his activities. It was right near Naples where excavations of perhaps the most significant archaeological and historical locations of the time, Pompeii and Herculaneum, were just taking place. These locations immediately became a sought-after destination of a number of travelers, specialists, scholars, and other curiosity seekers. Apart from his young age, education and social position – which undoubtedly directed Koller toward his future career of a collector – it was especially the atmosphere of archaeological research and collecting which led Koller, while

2 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, Archiv Rep. 1 Abt. A Inv. 41, Raffaele Gargiulo: *Inventario della collezione de Antichità, cioè Vasi Italo-Greci, Terre-cotte, Vetri, Bronzi e Marmi, non che una raccolta di Monumeti Egizzi ad altri oggete di belle arti di pripieta della famiglia di Koller.*

fulfilling his political duties, to succeed in creating a valuable collection of antiquities, comprising of about ten thousand items.

From testimonies of the period and the preserved documentation, we can infer that in creating his art collection, Baron Koller carefully adhered to official protocols and royal decrees concerning not only archaeological excavations, but also trade of antiquities. Furthermore, we can find evidence regarding the official process of managing the archaeological work in the state archive in Naples and in Koller's estate. There we can discover official documents in which the director of the royal museum, Michele Arditi, grants Koller permission to carry out archaeological excavations in specific areas<sup>3</sup>. The Prussian scholar, Eduard Gerhard (1795–1867), writes that Koller behaved as tactfully as possible, in a manner becoming of a diplomat, although collecting was only his personal hobby (Gerhard 1829: 170). Koller's civil behavior was emphasized precisely because at that time unauthorized practices were often prevalent at ancient locations, as well as in the trade of antiquities.

What did the royal decrees and prohibitions actually contain? Where did these regulations come from and what exactly led the king to enact them?

Several rulers sat on the throne during the period of excavations, and all claimed the most significant discoveries for themselves<sup>4</sup>. From the very beginning of excavation activities, Charles VII planned to keep all of the valuable discoveries for the consolidation of the glory and prestige of the royal crown, and with this intention, he had a museum built near the royal palace in Portici where he was going to store and further enlarge his art collection (Venuti 1750: 37).

Fearing too much popularity, which would undoubtedly attract a flock of curious explorers lusting for wealth and adventure, the king repeatedly issued orders prohibiting the free movement of visitors in the uncovered parts of the city; and to enter this museum, a visitor not only needed a special permit but

3 The Museum of Czech Literature Literary Archive in Prague, fund of Franz von Koller, unprocessed fund, license issued on the November 14, 1825, sent on May 14t 1826. – ASN, Ministero degli affari interni, Inventario II – Antichità e Belle Arti, bb. 1966–2147, b. 2030, fasc. 312, *Permesso al Barone Koller di fare scavi di Antichità*, 1824.

4 Starting with Charles VII of Naples (1716–1788; reigned between 1734–1759), who stood at the onset of the uncovering of the city, through his successor Ferdinand IV (I) (1751–1825; reigned intermittently between 1751–1825) to Napoleon's brother Joseph Bonaparte (1768– 1844; reigned in 1806–1808) and later his brother in law General Joachim Murat (1767–1815; reigned between 1808–1815).

was not allowed to make any notes or drawings. Due to this royal monopoly over the excavations and exhibited art, all visitors had to request a license and also needed a personal custodian. Archaeological excavations and discoveries were scrupulously guarded for many decades, and only selected sculptures and paintings could be copied and published. However, the effort to protect treasures of the ancient world from meddlers had an opposite effect and the less they were shown to the public, the more the public craved any information on them (Allroggen-Bedel 1993: 37). Thus, the number of artists copying the collection kept increasing and because it was impossible to monitor each of them, they were constantly reminded of the regulations about the prohibition of copying and drawing issued by Charles VII. Regardless of all these orders, a number of documentary illustrations depicting particular antiquities were secretly appearing as early as the 1760s. Many tripods were drawn, copied and published by a number of authors. They all appeared collectively and separately not only in albums of prints and illustrated publications but also on drawings of many artists (Fig. 2).

However, before we can take a look at the artists that rendered Koller's desired tripod, it is necessary to make sure exactly which tripod he was actually requesting.

Although there exist plenty of correspondence, records, inventories, and drawings devoted to bronze tripods from the royal collection, it is not ultimately clear which object they are referring to. In his letter, Baron Koller requests permission to create a copy of the tripod which is by his own words located in the "Galleria de'bronzi minuti," but he does not specify it closer in any way. According to the aforementioned guide *Guida per Real Museo Borbonico*, only one tripod was situated in this section of the museum during Koller's time in Naples – a richly decorated tripod with sphinxes. Most scholars still firmly contend that this piece was found in the Pompeiian ruins of the Temple of the goddess Isis which was uncovered in 1765. However, by thorough research of period documents, I have discovered that this tripod appears as early as 1753 in a publication titled *Observations Upon the Antiquities of the Town of Herculaneum, Discovered at the Foot of Mount Vesuvius*, which not only changes the date of the discovery of the object but also refutes Pompeii as the place it was found in (Bellicard, Cochin 1753: pl. 22). The three sphinxes are seated atop richly decorated supports with lion paws at the bottom which bear a vessel with a fine relief depicting *bucranium*. This "tripode bellissimo con tre sfingi" also appears in *Raccolta dei monumenti piu interessanti del Real Museo Borbonico* by Raffaele Gargiulo, the chief court restorer (and a controversial figure of the

trade of antiquities at the time), who played an essential part in Koller's collecting. Apart from that, it had seen publication in 1842 within the royal catalogue of antiquities (Pistoletti 1842: 360; Gargiulo 1845).

As referred to above, in his response to Koller's request, Michele Arditi points instantly to a specific page in the *Voyage Pittoresque ou Description des Royaumes de Naples et de Sicile* from 1782, where the requested stool should be printed (Saint-Non 1782: fig. 13). However, there are two tripods on this particular page, neither of which are decorated with sphinxes. The first one has a relatively simple shape and ornamentation; the second is decorated with three satyrs. It is precisely this latter tripod that is mentioned in the *Guida per Real Museo Borbonico*, which marks it as a discovery from Herculaneum, but in contrast to the tripod requested by Koller, it places it in the so-called "Gabinetto degli oggetti Riservati" (Fig. 3).

Was it, therefore, Arditi's mistake? Or was the tripod with sphinxes located in the same section as the tripod with satyrs at the time of Koller's stay? The decision of director Arditi to withdraw all the antiquities of "pornographic nature" and the creation of a new section called "Gabinetto degli oggetti osceni", renamed in 1823 to "Gabinetto degli oggetti riservati", could have played a part in this. All artworks with an erotic motif were exhibited in one of the halls with access restricted to adult men of pure character.

We can search for answers in the aforementioned inventory of Koller's collection. In its section of bronzes, under the inventory number 691, we discover a bronze tripod including an annotation denoting it is a modern copy after the original from the Real Museo Borbonico. Gargiulo's description clearly states that *esso è composto da tre fauni*, it is therefore without question a copy of the tripod with satyrs. Nevertheless, the seemingly resolved enigma is complicated again by the following item, number 692: *Tripode è conformato da tre branche di leoni che posano su di essi altrettante sfince con vari arabeschi e ornate di rilievo e bassorilievi*. Thus, Baron Koller obviously acquired copies of both tripods for his collection: the one with satyrs, as well as the one with sphinxes.

Whether Baron Koller requested permission to copy either of these tripods in the revealed correspondence, the piece must have been one of the most famous objects of its kind at that time, which was frequently reproduced, copied, appeared in popular historical scenes from ancient times and even served as an example in the education of craftsmen and industrialists<sup>5</sup>. Their appearance

5 For the function of both tripods as models for contemporary education of design, see e.g. Henry Moses, *Vorbilder für Fabrikanten und Handwerker 1/2, 1821–1830*, img. 18 (Vier

varies fairly radically on a number of reproductions. In the case of the tripod with satyrs, it is nevertheless apparent that it is not only a problem of different technical level of individual reproductions; the difference in the musculature of the satyrs or in their faces, which are sometimes smooth and youthful and in other instances bearded and mature, are particularly striking (Fig. 4)

How did the artists go about the restrictions? They were forced to draw from memory, as was the case of Charles-Nicolas Cochin (1715–1790) and Jérôme-Charles Bellicard (1726–1786), or alternatively, they worked with previous drawings or prints, which explains why they made and repeated various mistakes. Similarly, Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) created an engraving of the tripod with sphinxes for his famous 1778 cycle *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcofagi, tripodi...* after a considerably sketchy and imprecise drawing by Vincenzo Brenna (1747–1820). The strict royal decrees also made Anne Claude de Caylus (1692–1765) acknowledge only one of his assistants called Boutin and withheld the rest of the creators of the model drawings. Thus, clearly, part of the depictions of the tripods could not meet the modern requirement for documentary accuracy of records, which could be the main reason Koller asked for access to the original.

As a result of the obstacles which were posed in the way of collectors and publishers by strict Neapolitan royal officials, a number of seemingly authentic depictions of discoveries including tripods often vary significantly from each other and therefore do not stand up to the demands of documentary accuracy. A comparison of drawings of another chair, which was located in the royal museum, can serve as evidence. It is a foldable portable tripod found in Herculaneum, labelled by Raffaele Gargiulo as one of the “most interesting” objects of the royal museum in *Raccolta dei piu monumenti interessant del Real Museo Borbonico*. The stool was included in the catalogue of the Real Museo Borbonico as well. Here, it is described as a *mensa di marmo con piedi di bronzo* and, surprisingly, has one more leg than in Gargiulo’s drawing.

A similar example can be found in an illustration from 1782 where the painter Louis Jean Desprez (1743–1804) depicted the transfer of the discovered antiques to the new royal museum in Naples. A detail of this illustration shows that both the tripod with satyrs and the tripod with sphinxes were among the most important and prestigious antique discoveries, but on closer inspection,

*DreifüÙe aus Bronze aus Pompeji und Herculaneum), In: Kupferstichkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, inv. no. 34.19–1991.*

we can see that the “tripod” with satyrs has four legs. These and other examples show that at least among the older generation of antiquarians and after among the public, the perception of authenticity and documentary accuracy was in many regards peculiar. The specific form was not as important as uniqueness and the nature of the material (Fig. 5).

Later researchers perceived modern copies as having little value as collection items, serving better as educational aids. According to some Czech researchers (Sklenář 1989: 101; Dufková 2016: 21–41), Koller’s tripods were acquired “not because of material or scientific value, but as proof of how progressively Koller saw his future museum – they are ‘visual aids’ and exhibition accessories: copies, casts of bronzes and vessels predominantly from the Museo Borbonico, and especially three-dimensional models of buildings and excavations”<sup>6</sup>. If Koller’s tripod were merely supposed to complement the exhibition hall and evoke an atmosphere of the ancient world, the baron would probably have chosen a more comfortable way and acquired cheap copies, so popular and easy to get all over Italy<sup>7</sup>. He, however, made the effort to request officially a bronze copy of an object from the royal museum, which had to take considerable time and money. Therefore, in my opinion, the case of Koller’s tripod is a clear illustration of how erudite collectors were not easily satisfied with cheap copies available on the market or inaccurate drawings, because to them, these objects, instead of being only exhibition supplements meant to convey an atmosphere, were collectable items and real works of art<sup>8</sup>.

Translated by Anna Jaegerová

6 For the new interpretation of Koller’s collection, see Eliška Petřeková 2019.

7 Baron Koller did not choose cheap local copies either, nor was he satisfied by the luxurious realization of brothers Luigi and Francesco Manfredini, supplemented by gold, marble and lapis lazuli, often used as diplomatic gifts; Emperor Napoleon himself received this elegant and costly copy as a gift from Eugène de Beauharnais (1781–1824), the then Viceroy of Italy (Vergano B.G. di 2002).

8 Both copies of the bronze tripods from Naples were later acquired from Koller’s estate by the Prussian royal collections in Berlin (tripod with sphinxes, inv. no. Fr. 2417, tripod with satyrs, inv. no. Fr. 2437), where they were exhibited until 1888 in the Altes Museum. They were then moved to the Berlin Museum of Applied Arts (inv. no. K 9456 a, b), from where they were lost (apparently during World War II). The acquisition was reported as early as 1829 by Jakob Andreas Konrad Levezow 1829: 10. For more information on the history of the collection after Koller’s death, see Petřeková E. 2017.

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Fig. 5. Louis Jean Desprez, *Antiquities Found at Herculaneum Being Transported to the Naples Museum*, pen and black ink and watercolor, ca. 1782. London: British Museum, inv. 1864,1210.502. ©Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 1

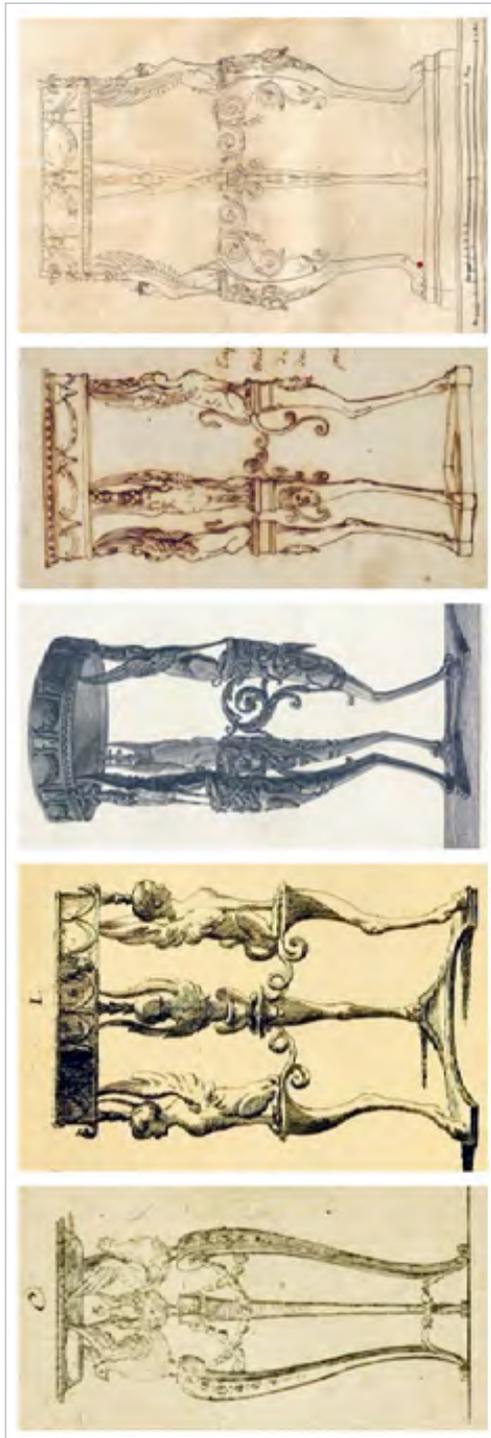


Fig. 2

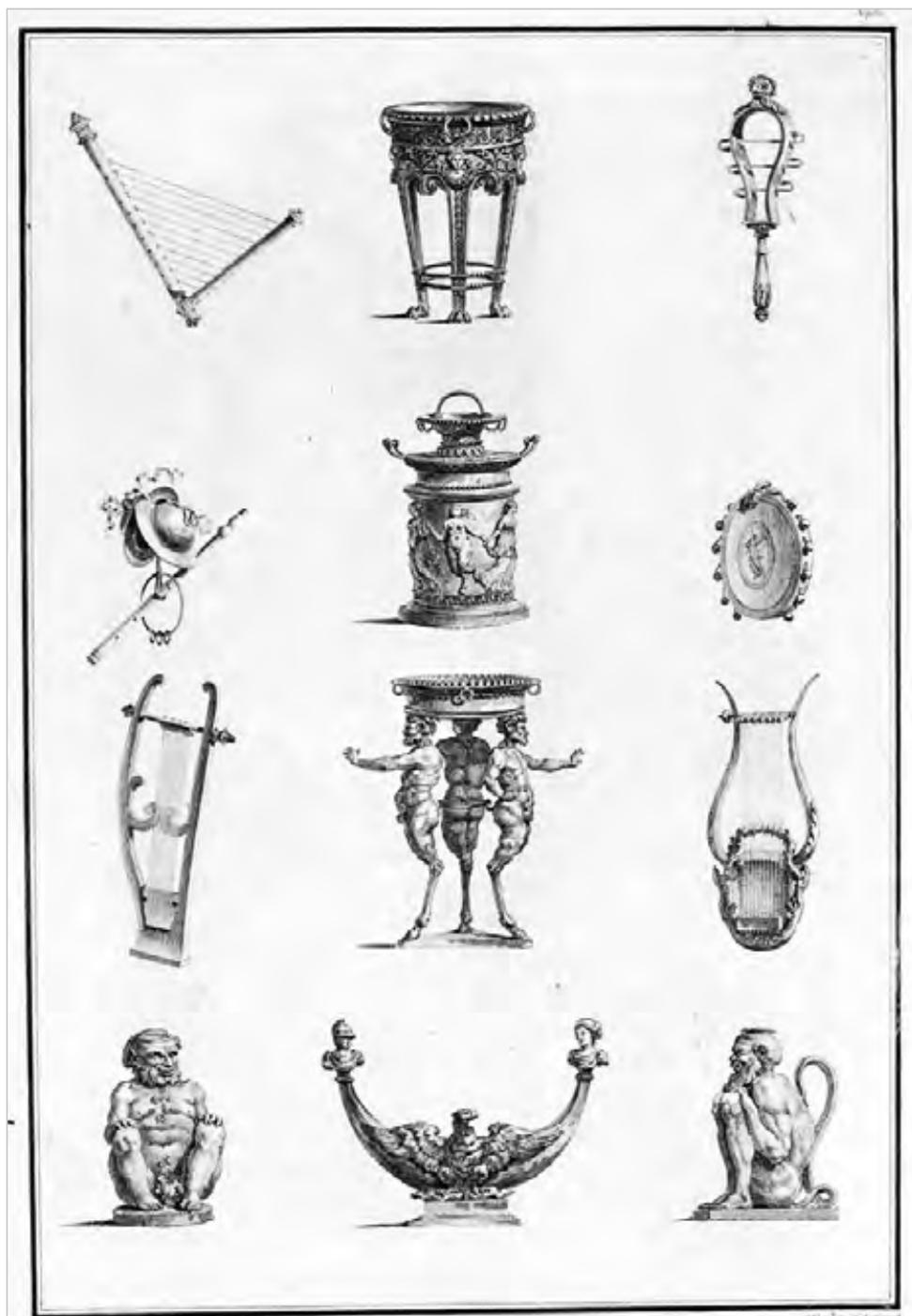


Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5