CULTURE. ANTIQUITIES AT THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME

Home to a little-known but significant collection of antiquities

Despite the fact that it largely came into place more than a century ago it has to rank as one of the least-known. Now thanks to the digital age, the museum collection of the American Academy in Rome (AAR) is finally coming into its own.

It comprises more than 5,000 artefacts in all, many now viewable on the website nrb.aarome.org. For pottery, there is everything from Greek geometric vases of the eighth century BC to late Roman ware. And that's just a start. Cinerary urns, jewellery, coins, oil lamps, all sorts of sculpture, Etruscan mirrors, even bits of timber from Caligula's now-lost ships at Nemi all find a place. Then there are the Roman inscriptions: There are almost 200 of them, most embedded in the walls of the academy's courtyard. Together they offer so much information about ancient social relations that a BBC documentary on everyday life in imperial Rome structured an episode around them.

The collection came together through purchases and donations prior to world war two and the international antiquities laws enforced today. The true founder was archaeologist and connoisseur Richard Norton, director of the old American School of Classical Studies in Rome, a predecessor to today's AAR. He was born in 1872 as the youngest child of Charles Eliot Norton - social critic, public intellectual, Harvard art historian and first president of the Archaeological Institute of America.

Born into immense privilege, the younger Norton led a life that was robust even by the standards of Teddy Roosevelt's era. In the space of two decades he survived art world intrigue, marital scandal, bitter archaeological rivalries, widely-publicised political missteps, and a 1911 assassination attempt in Libya, finally to earn top French and British war honours for his work in launching (with the help of Edith Wharton and Henry James) and directing the American Ambulance Corps. Sadly, he had no time to relish his hero status; Norton was felled by meningitis in Paris in August 1918.

In his lifetime, Norton found himself locked in a fierce rivalry with Bernard Berenson; they fought as competing art agents to Isabella Stewart Gardner for the new Boston museum she created in 1903. Evidently the antiquities that Norton did not send to Boston went to the American School in Rome. His sheer love of high quality purchases then ensured that many of these antiquities remained in Rome, a place they were intended to be in the first place.
scale of high-quality purchases then served as a magnet for other contemporary donors to fill out that collection.

It was in 1911 that the American School of Classical Studies in Rome and the American Academy in Rome (founded 1894, for art and architecture) decided to unite, in a daring disciplinary merger of humanities and the arts. Three years later the two schools took up a new joint home on the Janiculum hill designed by the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White.

When the two academies resolved to cohabitate, each brought its own collection of antiquities into the union. Among the pieces evidently belonging to the artists was a nude relief of Silvanus, the Roman god of the woods, dating to the second century BC. The provenance is perfectly known: it was long part of the magnificent art collection of the Villa Ludovisi in Rome. A photograph from 1885, just before the Boncompagni Ludovisi family sold a major portion of its estate for development, shows that the Silvanus was set in the pediment of an outdoor shrine that sheltered the famed Battle Sarcophagus. Tough financial times in the 1890s forced the family to sell many of their best sculptures to the city of Rome, which today exhibits them at the Palazzo Altemps museum. Others stayed put in the Boncompagni Ludovisi palazzo on Via Veneto that is now the American embassy, and at the Casino Aurora on Via Lombardia, a spectacular survival of the Villa Ludovisi that remains the head of the family’s residence.

So how did the Silvanus come into possession of the American Academy? It must be associated with the fact that the young institution rented the Casino Aurora from the Boncompagni Ludovisi from 1895 until 1907. As it happens, the Silvanus is not the only ex-Ludovisi piece on the Janiculum: a wall of the AAR courtyard holds a Roman-era Medusa’s head that used to be set into the inner side of a gate to the Villa Ludovisi. Then in the Academy’s entrance vestibule there is a large seated figure identifiable (despite missing appendages) as Mars disarmed by Venus. An inventory of 1933 shows that none other than the villa’s founder, Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi, had acquired the sculpture.

The Academy’s inscriptions and larger marble pieces have been continuously visible, if not always noticed, in its public spaces for most of the past century. However the many smaller artefacts of the museum collection ended up spending a good 50 years in the dark. The outbreak of world war two forced the closure of the AAR museum and the transfer of its contents to storage. There the objects remained until the late 1980s, when a group of Academy veterans resolved to make these evocative examples of ancient material culture once again available to AAR scholars and artists.

Following two decades of effort the work is nearing completion. The collection has found a new, stylish space in the Academy compound, dedicated to the memories of Richard Norton and classicist Albert William Van Buren, who studied and cared for the collection in its first incarnation. The website nvy.aarome.org features detailed work by Academy scholars on several thousand individual items, with a round of updates scheduled for spring 2012. A conservation programme is in full swing, in collaboration with the Accademia Belle Arti di Frosinone, and a new print publication on the collection’s highlights and a separate volume on the inscriptions are slated to appear soon.

For now, scholars outside the AAR can visit the museum collection only online. But still there are hundreds of permanently displayed objects to discover while attending one of the many open events that the Academy offers. It’s amazing that they’ve been there all along.