

In the Footsteps of Hamilton-Collecting Classical Antiquities

BY JAMES EDE

*'There has been this last century, great enquiry after this sort of Antiquity,
which hath occasion'd the careful preservation of innumerable coins and medals,
that doubtless else e'er this, been long since melted down and converted to other uses.'*

John Evelyn, 1697.

WHEN EVELYN WROTE THESE WORDS HE TOUCHED ON AN enduring truth. It is probably true to say that in no other field of art has the role of the collector been more important for the preservation of culture. This is partly, maybe even mainly, due to the enormous time-spans involved. Economic and political disturbance, war, religious bigotry, climate change – even changing tastes and fashion – have played a role in destroying the art of our earliest forbears. Had these malevolent factors not been counterbalanced by a passionate desire to preserve on the part of collectors, dealers and academics, we should not be able to enjoy the vast array of antiquities which have survived. This passion is by no means a modern phenomenon. The ancient Egyptians constantly harked back to the masterpieces of earlier epochs and indeed often appropriated sculptures for their own use by the judicious alteration of an inscription or two. During the heyday of Roman power collecting really took off – while denigrating the feebleness (as they saw it) of Athenian institutions, the Romans had tremendous admiration for Greek art, and shipped back home sculptures by the trireme-load. Most of these are now lost

to us and we can only glimpse the greatness of much of that art through the medium of slavish copies made by the Romans themselves.

The next great collecting epoch began with the Renaissance, particularly under the aegis of the Papacy, but it was not until the rise of the new superpower – England – that national and private collections on a huge scale were formed throughout Europe. Although Lord Arundel had been collecting antiquities in the mid 17th century, the taste for antiquities on the part of a much wider audience only started over a hundred years later. Sir William Hamilton (with the possible exception of Lord Elgin) is the most famous of the 'new' collectors of the period. Husband of the glamorous Emma (Lord Nelson's infamous lover), Hamilton was for a long time British Minister at Naples. In a period of only seven years he built a collection which included no fewer than 730 vases, 600 bronzes, 175 terracottas and 300 glass vessels. Having sold this to the British Museum, he began a second collection which eventually included a further 1,000 vases, though these were lost when the vessel bringing them back to England was



Figure 1, Engraving by C. Tomkins of Sir Joshua Reynolds' *The Dilettanti Society*. (Author's collection)

wrecked off the Scilly Isles. Townley formed a collection of marbles on a similarly colossal scale. Together with Hope, Bessborough and Bankes, and other less well-known figures, these men formed the Society of Dilettanti, effectively a dining club for connoisseurs, who would meet and discuss their latest acquisitions. A famous painting by Joshua Reynolds, now hanging in Brooks's club in London (together with a large group of individual portraits of Dilettanti members) shows Hamilton at his induction to the club, discussing one of his Greek vases (figure 1). The less celebrity-obsessed 18th century also had great fun ridiculing such men. In a caricature the cuckolded Hamilton sees his wife and her lover depicted as Cleopatra and Antony among the antiques he is perusing (figure 2). Such famous names as these formed however only the tip of the iceberg. For some seventy years the Grand Tour formed an essential part of the education of any well-to-do young Englishman and the vast majority returned with souvenirs of one sort or another. As a result England is still the repository of large quantities of classical antiquities ranging from minor vases and terracotta statuettes to masterpieces in marble and bronze. The great flowering of neo-classicism in architecture and design went hand-in-hand with this trend and the effect of this on European, and later American, taste and attitudes to the past remains powerful to this day. The decline of the classical education in the last century narrowed the interest in antiquities and for a few decades this area of collecting was the preserve of a very small number of people, able to acquire objects at prices which seem absurdly modest today. Over the last forty years or so the picture has changed dramatically. Modern taste decries the fussy, and ancient art, with its clean lines and timeless proportions fits very well into a setting with contemporary art and more minimal furnishing style. The



Figure 2, J^s. Gillray, *A Cognoscenti contemplating Beauties of Antique*, Published Feb. 11th 1801, H. Humphrey, (Author's collection)

great 18th century collectors understood this well, most of them having large galleries in the houses devoted to their collections. A contemporary setting works in the same way – the juxtaposition of a marble torso with a bright modern canvas can be incredibly striking and there has been an upsurge in interest in the field, resulting in sharp price rises for fine objects. This trend has been accelerated by the increasing importance of provenance and by the gradual decline in the number of available works. It is true that in some areas prices have only recently approached the heady levels achieved during the late 18th and 19th centuries. When Tanagra, an ancient site in north-east Greece, was first excavated in the 1870s and 1880s, large numbers of fine Hellenistic terracottas emerged on to the market. Mostly of young women, clad in sensuous costume, these statuettes conformed closely to the classical ideals of the time (figure 3). As a result of huge demand, these relatively



Figure 3, Statuette of a young woman. 3rd century BC. 8 7/8 in. (220 mm) (Photo Private Collection)

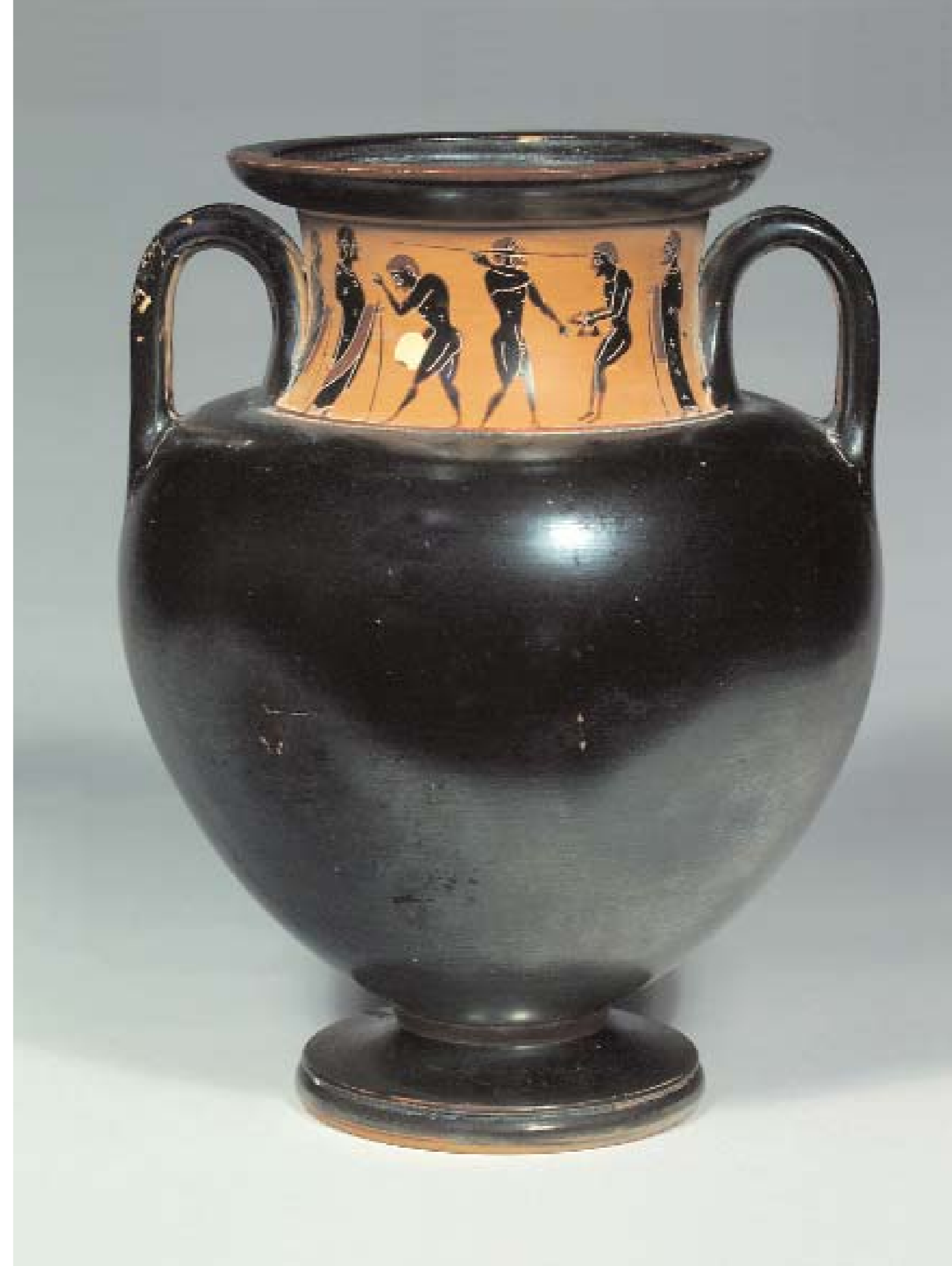
Figure 4 (opposite), Neck amphora with scenes of Olympic sports. c.530-520 BC, 10 1/2 in. (271 mm) (Photo Private Collection)

much – say \$15,000 – though prices are climbing fast.

Antiquities can attract the collector for a variety of reasons – aesthetically for their form or decoration, historically for their context, financially as a hedge against inflation – but beyond everything they have an emotional appeal for their great age and for the very personal link they provide with the background of western civilisation. Comparatively speaking, antiquities can even now be remarkably inexpensive. A sculpture made in the 1st century AD may cost far less than a Renaissance copy of the same subject, and a vase made in 1850 BC less than its Victorian equivalent.

The two areas of classical art (a term used here in its 18th century sense of art from the Greek and Roman worlds) which offer the greatest possibilities to the new collector are pottery and sculpture. Greek pottery is the easiest and perhaps the most satisfying field of all. The supply is still comparatively plentiful, the variety large, the objects are extremely decorative and the scenes shown on figured pieces give a direct insight into many aspects of mythology and social history (figure 4). Greek pots are often referred to as ‘vases’ though this is usually a misnomer, for although some pieces were intended primarily for decoration or presentation, the vast majority were made for everyday use, mainly for the preparation and serving of food and drink, or for holding cosmetics or oils for the bath. The majority of vessels had some connection with the serving and consumption of wine, which the Greeks usually drank heavily diluted. Mixing, as well as storage and drinking vessels were therefore needed.

The earliest pottery was modelled by hand or built up from coils of clay, but around 2000 BC the potter’s wheel was introduced into Greece and Crete and from this point on the techniques used for manufacture changed little over



humble sculptures changed hands for over £100, an enormous sum equating to roughly \$30,000 today. Numerous (very beautiful) forgeries naturally were not far behind. Nowadays we have no difficulty in distinguishing the real from the fake but the former fetch approximately half as



Figure 5 (opposite), Amphora with frieze of deities. c.530 BC.
17 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (442 mm) (Author's photograph)

Figure 6, Stele with figure of a youth. c.3rd century BC.
25 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (641 mm). (Photo Private Collection)

the centuries. The Greek potter usually dug his clay locally and left it to weather for some time before washing it and kneading it to the right consistency. A lump of clay was then 'thrown' on the centre of the wheel and shaped as it rotated. Pots of any size were made in two or more pieces – neck, body and foot for example – later joined with dilute clay. Handles and pouring spouts were shaped by hand. When the pot had dried leather-hard, the decoration was added and the piece was ready for firing. The black and red colours of Greek pottery result neither from pigment nor glaze, as we know them today, but are due to the fact that the clay, and the slip of dilute clay used for decoration, contained iron, which caused them to fire either red or black depending on conditions in the kiln. To produce black-figure and red-figure designs, typical of ancient Greece, a three-stage firing cycle was necessary. In the first stage, oxygen was allowed into the kiln and the *ferric* oxide in the clay turns both the body of the pot and the slip used for the design red. Next the kiln was closed to air and green wood added to the fuel which produced carbon monoxide gas. This drew the oxygen from the *ferric* oxide, changing it to *ferrous* oxide and turning the pot and slip black. Finally oxygen was again allowed into the kiln which united with the ferrous oxide in the still porous body of the pot, turning it back to red. The thin coating of





Figure 7 (*opposite*), Head of Athena Parthenos. 1st century BC/AD. 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (175 mm) (Author's photograph)

Figure 8, Statue of Aesculapius, god of healing. 2nd century AD. 19 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (490 mm) (Private Collection)

slip had however been cooked by this stage to a point which inhibited the re-entry of oxygen and so remained black. For added effect, pigments, usually red and white, were added to the design before firing.

Greek potteries were on workshop rather than factory scale, and the function of potter and artist seem usually to have been separate. Pots were occasionally signed by either the potter and/or the painter, though such pieces are rare and sought after. Although the vast majority of pots are unsigned, the work of a particular artist can often be recognised by stylistic comparison, and over the years scholars had built up elaborate records of the output of most of the workshops. As the painter's name is usually unknown he is given a name, either taken from the subject matter on his 'name vase' (for example the Gorgon Painter), or from the collection housing his major work (the Berlin Painter), or even from his distinctive style (The Affecter, named for his very mannered compositions, figure 5)

Although distinctive types of pottery come from other city states (in particular Corinth) it is the output from Athens which represents the supreme achievement of the Greek potters. The earliest Attic black-figure dates from c.610 BC, but it is not until c.560 BC that an assured Attic style had developed. The next three decades saw the finest flowering of black-figure. The technique continued to the mid 5th century, though the quality of the work declined fast from c.500 BC onwards. The tyranny of Peisistratos (560-527) consolidated the political and economic power of Athens, and created a climate in which the arts could flourish as never before. In sculpture there was a new understanding of anatomy and movement, and vase painters also turned toward a new naturalism. The black figure technique was particularly two-dimensional and its limitations made further progress difficult. The answer was





Figure 9 (*opposite*), Bronze statuette of Hercules. 1st century AD. 6 $\frac{3}{16}$ in. (158 mm). (Private Collection)

Figure 10, Bronze statuette of an actor. c.2nd century AD, 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (88 mm) (Author's photograph)

red-figure which appears first c.530 BC. The process gave the artist a new freedom of expression and allowed also for some gradations of tone by the use of dilute slip. The new technique lasted some two hundred years. From 530-480 BC was a period of development in which many of the problems of three-dimensional drawing were solved. Some eighty years of further output ensued which saw further advances in composition, though from c.440 there is a decline in artistic quality if not technique.

The long and draining war with Sparta, which ended in 404 BC with the complete defeat of Athens and her allies, resulted in the loss of Athenian export markets. These had been vital to the pottery industry, which went into decline – the output of the 4th century is generally undistinguished. Although the price range today for Attic pots is wide – examples of fine red figure work habitually command six-figure sums, whilst poor late examples can be had for a few hundred dollars – the vast majority fall in the price range of \$5000-\$100,000.

The price span for Greek and Roman sculpture is much broader. The medium used has a large bearing on price. Sculpture was made in three main materials, marble, bronze and terracotta. As has already been noted, Greek marble sculpture is rare on the market. Memorials carved in relief (figure 6), particularly in fragmentary condition, are the exception, but even these generally fetch well into five figures. Among the least expensive examples in marble are the so called neo-attic sculptures, made in Greece in the 1st century AD for export to Rome (figure 7). Roman marbles themselves are much more plentiful, in particular statuettes of deities (figure 8) and portraits which were widely popular from the Republican period onwards. Marble was the most favoured medium for grand tour collectors and large quantities are to be found in English





Figure 11, Terracotta statuette of a bull. 5th century BC, 2½ in. (54.6 mm long) (Author's photograph)

country houses. Lacunae on such pieces were often restored by Italian dealers (the Milord was well known to want complete examples), though such restoration can be jarring to modern taste.

Small scale Greek and Roman bronze statuettes are much more plentiful and therefore less expensive than marble. Almost all ancient bronze sculpture was made by the lost wax method: the figure was modelled in wax and covered with clay. When the clay was heated, the wax flowed out and was replaced with molten metal in the space provided. For hollow-cast figures, the wax was modelled over a clay core, held in place with pins. In order to remove the bronze casting, the clay mantle had to be broken, so that every piece made by this process is unique. In some cases however, a clay or stone mould was used to produce the wax 'originals', producing thereby a nearly identical set of objects when more than one example was needed – say a set of four feet for a bronze vessel for example.

The majority of classical bronzes were made for votive purposes, and represent deities (figure 9), but everyday subjects such as actors (figure 10), athletes and animals can also be found.

Terracotta is the humblest material in which Greek and Roman sculptors worked, but these small scale pieces can

exhibit great virtuosity; combined with the fact that they are relatively extremely inexpensive (\$500-\$20,000 for all but the very best, and the majority under \$10,000) makes them an ideal subject for a collector of more modest means. The earliest terracottas were made by hand or on the potters wheel, but soon after 700 BC the technique of moulding was introduced, completely transforming the craft. After moulding and before firing, terracottas were retouched by hand to sharpen the detail and this affords them a measure of individuality. After firing most pieces in the classical period were painted in polychrome. Such colour was fugitive however and rarely survives (figure 11)

Most terracottas were made as offerings. Priests at shrines would sell them to suppliants, rather in the way that Catholic churches sell candles. The priests derived their income from this source, and when the shrine became full needed to make space; reselling the statuettes would have been sacrilegious and so they were buried in sanctified pits beside the shrine. As can be imagined the numbers involved were large- in one such pit in Sicily, over 30,000 fragmentary statuettes were found. As well as surviving in large numbers, terracottas cover a wide variety of subjects,

Figure 12, Terracotta statuette of the goddess Nike. c.2nd century BC. 9¾ in. (248 mm) (Private Collection)



human, divine (figure 12) and animal.

A major concern for any new collector is that of authenticity. The only advice that can be given is to buy from a trustworthy source, preferably under the advice of a specialist. While there are scientific tests, the best way to authenticate an antiquity is by comparison, taking in form, material, subject and condition. The specialist will conduct these comparisons on the basis of his 'eye', that elusive compound of a great deal of experience with natural flair, and the first essential for any potential collector is that he should begin to acquire an 'eye' himself. Firstly learn about the chosen area as quickly as possible – visit museums and read, read, read. The formation of a collection of antiquities is first and foremost a matter of personal taste, with finance and available space as secondary factors. The collector should always buy the best he can afford.

Finally there is the question of provenance, which has assumed increasing importance in recent years.

Antiquities have been collected for centuries and since then hundreds of thousands, if not millions of objects have emerged. Unfortunately, few have documentary provenance, as historically it simply was not an issue. This is as true of museums as private collections, a fact acknowledged in a recent article: '...the provenances of its (the British Museum's) vast collection of three dimensional objects as well as prints and drawings are much more difficult to establish. Purchase invoices have rarely been kept, and correspondence concerning acquisitions has only survived in exceptional circumstances.'¹ If major public collections have this problem, it can be envisaged how much worse the situation was for private collectors. For this reason it is important not to let the tail wag the dog, but at the same time it is wise to ask about provenance when buying. Apart from anything else, the earlier history

of a piece can be fascinating, and can create a connection between the new collector and those of the past, such as Hamilton and Townley, which is rewarding and exciting in itself. It also serves to remind us that we can never be more than temporary guardians of the past.

NOTES

1. G. Bartrum 'Research into wartime provenance at the British Museum' BMJ No.37 (Summer 2000)