

British reception of the Durand vases sold at auction in Paris

*by Ian Jenkins*¹

Sir William Hamilton is justifiably celebrated as the founder of British interest in Greek vase-painting. A few vases had reached the British Museum before 1772, but in that year the remarkable acquisition was made of Hamilton's first vase collection. It has become famous as the first major collection of Greek vases to reach British shores, and also because of the great impact that the publication of the collection had on contemporary taste.² It is not necessary to relate here the now familiar story of Hamilton's vases and their influence on such important figures as the potter Josiah Wedgwood, the modeller and sculptor John Flaxman and that 'high-priest' of Regency style Thomas Hope.³ Of more interest: here is the comparison drawn some fifty years later between the Hamilton vases in the British Museum and the collection of Chev. Edmé-Antoine Durand, sold at auction in Paris in the late Spring of 1836.⁴

Durand was born at Auxerre on the 8th of July 1768. He was the son of a wealthy merchant and entered the mercantile profession himself, acquiring a formidable fortune. With this he built up a collection of paintings, prints, gems, coins and vases.⁵ Part of his vase collection was sold to the Louvre in 1825; the rest was not

disposed of until after his death at Florence on the 28th of March 1835.⁶

Peter Oluf Brøndsted, Director of the Royal Coin Cabinet in Copenhagen,⁷ advising the British Museum as to whether it should attempt to procure some of the Durand vases at the Paris sale, has this to say: "The Hamilton Collection was formed half a century ago on a comparatively small scale and restrained to a few localities in the provinces of the Kingdom of Naples ... They [the vases] were among the best of their day but they will not in any way compare with those more recently discovered. They are, in fact, superannuated, and of little or no use for systematic and archaeological study. The Durand collection is exactly the reverse and contains just what the British Museum wants, viz. a fine and almost complete collection of select specimens of all kinds of Greek vases ..."⁸ Brøndsted places great emphasis on the importance of what he calls "a systematic and useful series of specimens", the lack of which he felt made the collection of vases at the British Museum the weakest of all its collections – "a mere object of curiosity".

This letter is one of a series of documents in the archives of the British Museum that relate to the even-

1. The author wishes to thank D. Bailey, D. von Bothmer, L. Burn and B. F. Cook for their helpful comments upon a draft of this paper. It was first published (in French) in Laurens and Pomian 1988, 269-278 and is included in the present volume at the request of the editors.
2. Fothergill 1969, 66ff.; Haskell 1984, 177-91; Vickers 1987, 98-137; Jenkins & Sloan 1996.
3. For Hope see Watkin 1968, especially 106-08; also Waywell 1986, espec. 36; Tillyard 1923.

4. Witte 1836.
5. Amat 1968, 652.
6. 7,380 objects at a cost of 480,000 francs including 2,260 vases: Pottier 1896, 62f.
7. Berghaus & Schreckenberg 1983, 294.
8. BMA (British Museum Archives), OP (Original Papers), XIV, the 17th of April 1836.



Fig. 1. Adam Buck and his family, 1813. Water colour on board. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

tual acquisition of a number of vases from the Durand sale. They are of interest for their objective appraisal of the state of the art of vase-collecting at this time, and through them we are made aware of the difference in approach between the prevailing interest of late-eighteenth-century connoisseurs, and those of the next generation.

The momentous event that coincided with this new thinking was the discovery of the vase-rich tombs at Vulci on the estate of Napoleon's younger brother Lu-

cien Bonaparte, the Prince of Canino as he became known. In the years 1828-29 over 3,000 vases were excavated in the Etruscan tombs where they had been deposited in antiquity. A number of publications recorded the new finds soon after their discovery.⁹ The second volume of the *Annali* of the recently founded *Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* carried a frontispiece with an engraved allegory of the excavations.¹⁰ (fig. 2) The central figure is imaginatively adapted from the birth of Erichthonios shown on the namepiece of the Painter of Munich 2413,¹¹ the subject having been reproduced in the first volume of *Monumenti Inediti* (fig. 3).¹² Instead of Erichthonios, Ge (the Earth) yields up an unexpected harvest (here a neck-amphora); on the left Athena keeps count with stylus and writing-tablet, while on the right a male figure assists in the excavation. The Athena is adapted from another Munich vase, a Panathenaic amphora by the Triptolemos Painter, also published in the first volume of *Monumenti Inediti*.¹³

Canino was not the only proprietor of the great cemetery at Vulci, for originally there were three. Canino's was the most fruitful part; next came that of Candelori excavated by Secondiano Campanari and Melchiade Fossati; finally, that of the Feoli family.¹⁴ The Vulci vases were quickly dispersed, either through public sale or private arrangement, and a number of public and private collections were thus equipped. Durand's was one of these.¹⁵

The British Museum was slow to react and quickly fell behind the major public collections of Paris, Berlin and Rome.¹⁶ Thirty two of Campanari's vases, catalogued by Brøndsted, were brought to England in 1832

9. Canino 1829; Gerhard 1831, 5-218. For a full bibliography see: Jahn 1854, xvi and note 19; Bothmer 1987, 190ff; De Angelis 1990.

10. *Annali dell'Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* Vol. II, 1830, frontispiece to the first fascicule drawn and engraved by St. Ange Desmaisons.

11. Ex Canino, Beazley 1963, 495, 1; Beazley 1971, 380; Bérard 1974, plate 2, fig. 5.

12. Gerhard & Panofka 1829-1833, pl. 10.

13. Plate 26.6; Beazley 1963, 362.14.

14. Gerhard 1831, 6-8; Jahn 1854, xv-xvi; Dennis 1848, plate facing page 397 gives a map of Vulci with the various properties clearly marked.

15. Gerhard 1830, 257; and see Campanari below.

16. Paris acquired the first Durand collection in 1825; the first vases to come out of the Canino tombs were excavated clandestinely and were sold to Dorow, from whom they quickly passed into the Royal collection in Berlin; the first Candelori collection went to the Vatican.



Fig. 2. Frontispiece of the second volume of *Annali del Instituto di Corrispondenza Archeologiche* showing an allegory of the discovery of the vases in the Etruscan tombs at Vulci.

and displayed in London in the hope that they would be purchased by the British Museum.¹⁷ This hope was unfulfilled, but an amusing anecdote to link the names of Campanari and Durand is recorded in a letter of W. R. Hamilton: “I remember very well two or three years ago”, writes Hamilton, “when Campanari was over

here and disposing of his vases at very moderate prices, Durand hearing of it came to England and in my presence told Campanari that he was spoiling his own market – offered him high prices and carried him off, vases and all, to Paris”.¹⁸ Durand evidently then bought some of the Campanari vases, for at least two

17. Brøndsted 1832. Correspondence relating to the Campanari vases can be found in BMA as follows: OP, IX, the 7th of September 1831; the 18th of December 1831; the 13th of January 1832; the 25th of January 1832; 10 Eb. 1832. Officers Reports

14A, December 1831; 14B, January 1832, cf. the article by Bodil Bundgaard Rasmussen in this publication.

18. BMA, OP, XIV, the 19th of April 1836.

of the finer pieces reappear in the 1836 sale catalogue of the Durand collection.¹⁹

Hamilton was among those who urged the Trustees of the British Museum to make whatever purchases they could at the forthcoming sale. He lamented the fact that the national collection had fallen so far behind those of Italy, Germany and France. The few vases of any major importance in Britain at that time were, he felt, in private hands, in the cabinets of the banker and poet Samuel Rogers and Col. Wm. Leake, numismatist and classical topographer.²⁰ The opinion of these two distinguished figures was also sought²¹ along with that of Thomas Burgon, merchant and collector, who was to go bankrupt, finishing his days as a paid employee cataloguing coins in the British Museum.²² They were all equally enthusiastic in urging the purchase of the Durand vases, but what was it that set the Durand Vases apart?

Brøndsted had spoken of their providing the basis for a more systematic and 'scientific' understanding of Greek vases, and indeed before the excavations at Vulci there was insufficient scope among the existing repertoire to attempt a valid analysis of the different schools and their chronology. In a survey of two hundred years of vase-connoisseurship, Dietrich von Bothmer praises the pioneering efforts of Eduard Ger-

hard who was the first to attempt such a system on the basis of the new vases from Vulci.²³ Of especial importance were the new inscriptions that gave the names of the ancient potters and painters. However the authors of the Durand sale catalogue, Jean de Witte in consultation with Charles Lenormant, drew back from questions relating to style and manufacture, preferring a classification based on subject matter and shape. The various divisions, therefore, were arranged under such headings as mythological subjects, heroic, mystical and funerary, civic life, animals and monsters, and then by shape for the non-figured or plastic vases. A chart of shapes and their names was included at the back of the catalogue.²⁴ The detailed descriptions of the Durand vases, therefore, focused attention upon their illustrative properties, their ability to document topics of antiquarian interest (figs. 4-5).

In short we may say that what set the Durand vases apart from the Hamilton collection was the fact that while the latter had appealed largely on aesthetic grounds, the Durand collection was more the scholar's choice. The frequency of potter and painter signatures on the Vulci vases has already been mentioned, but of particular interest in the Durand vases were the inscriptions often to be found identifying individual figures in the paintings.²⁵ It may be argued, however,

19. Witte 1836, no. 318 and 643.

20. For Rogers see Jenkins 1988, appendix, p. 457, no. 18; For Leake see Greifenhagen 1985, 123-5 and the article by Witmore & Buttrey in this publication.

21. BMA, OP, XIV, the 21st of April 1836 and the 29th of April 1836.

22. BMA, OP, XIV, the 25th of April 1836.

23. Bothmer 1987, 191. That is not to say that a chronology of Greek vase-painting had not been attempted previously, thus: D'Hancarville 1767, 108; Millingen 1813, viii.

24. Bothmer 1987, 193.

25. Thus Edward Hawkins, Keeper of Antiquities, writes (BMA, Officers Reports 18, April 1836): "(the Durand vases) ... are of an exceedingly early period, decorated with mythological and historical subjects of great interest and having in many instances the names of the characters attached to their representations ... Some of the subjects are illustrative of ancient authors, others assign actions to well-known characters for which we have no written authority ... It may be safely asserted that nothing has

contributed more to the illustration of the mythology and heroic history of early Greece than the vases of that class which are now offered for sale". Hawkins then goes on to laud the variety of shapes to be found among the Durand vases. But another document makes it clear that *subjects* interested the British Museum above *shapes*. A copy of a draft letter, unsigned but perhaps by W.R. Hamilton, gives instructions on behalf of the Trustees for what it would be desirable to acquire from the Paris Sale. (BMA, OP, XIV, April 1836): "... As many of those we possess are invaluable for the beauty of their forms, as for the variety of shapes and exquisite polish, we wish more particularly to direct your attention to those which appear to possess interest from the subjects illustrative of the history, mythology, epic, lyric and dramatic poetry of the Greeks – as well as of their ordinary habits of civil life – and of those which, bearing Greek inscriptions (whether in the archaic characters or those of the best period of Grecian refinement), have interest for the philological inquirer and antiquary ..."



Fig.3. The birth of Erichthonios. Engraving after the name vase of the painter of Munich 2413.

that this *Hamilton-aesthetic v. Durand-antiquarian* opposition is too simplistic. Certainly, learned men were not indifferent to the beauty of the Durand vases; equally, the *cognoscenti* of Hamilton's generation had not overlooked the light that vases could shed upon questions relating to the beliefs, manners and customs of the ancients. A brief acquaintance with d'Hancar-

ville's commentary upon the Hamilton vases confirms that there certainly was this interest. Two vases that most readily spring to mind when we think of the Hamilton Collection are the celebrated Meidias hydria, London E224, and the calyx-krater, London E460.²⁶ The first shows the rape of Leucippidai by the Dioscourai in the upper register, while in the lower

26. For the fame of these two vases see references collected by Jenkins 1988, 450-1, notes 20-22.



Fig. 4. Achilles and Penthesilea. Black-figure amphora signed by the potter Exekias (and attributed to him as painter). (Ex-collection Durand). British Museum B210.

frieze we find Herakles resting in the Paradise Garden of the Hesperides. The krater shows a victorious *kitharodes* being crowned by Victories. In the eighteenth century it was thought to show the apotheosis of Homer. These two vases were famous in their day both for the quality of their drawing and for their subject matter.²⁷ In general, however, the Hamilton Collection contains a large proportion of late-Attic and South-Ita-

lian vases, the painted decoration of which, although often highly decorative, is frequently imprecise with regard to subject matter. Such vases were adequate for furnishing Wedgwood the potter with a repertoire of shapes, painting techniques and figured decoration, and for providing Thomas Hope with the necessary resources for his neo-Greek reconstructions to elevate British taste in such matters as costume and furniture.²⁸

27. Among the other vases most celebrated in the Hamilton collection was the volute-krater London F248, sometimes known as The Hamilton Vase. This was admired for aesthetic reasons. For the preeminence of the volute-krater in the neo-classical taste for

vases, see Jenkins, 1988, note 19, for scholarly consideration, more akin to those associated with the Durand vases, attention also focussed upon the Corinthian column-krater London B37.

28. Hope purchased part of the second Hamilton collection in 1801.

The Durand vases were of a different kind. They included a large number of Attic black- and early red-figured vases, where the drawing is not only tighter and more restrained, but also the iconography more intriguing.

There is another reason for the apparent readiness of some scholars to dismiss the Hamilton vases as ‘obsolete’ that has to do less with the vases themselves than with changing trends in the intellectual approach towards vases generally. At the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, a number of scholars subscribed enthusiastically to the notion that Greek vases could be interpreted ‘mystically’ and ‘symbolically’. C.A. Boettiger and A.L. Millin were among the first to expound a complete theory of Greek vase-painting based upon the supposed connection between vases and mystic, especially Bacchic, religion.²⁹ The tendency to see vases in this way, however, goes back to the influence of such publications as D’Hancarville’s *Recherches sur l’Origine, l’esprit et les progrès des arts de la Grèce ...* published in two volumes in 1785.³⁰ This wide-ranging and exhaustingly speculative work owes a great deal to contemporary interest in Oriental religions and, in particular, that of India.³¹ A number of volumes and monographs were devoted to unraveling the hidden meaning of Greek vases but one highly evocative image seems to capture the mood of the period, namely an extraordinary watercolour drawing by the Irish-born artist Adam Buck, now in the Yale Center for British Art. It is signed and dated 1813 and

shows the artist and his family with the bust of a deceased child.³² (fig. 1)

The vases in columbarium niches in the background serve to illustrate both the contemporary vogue for vases as decorative adjuncts to fashionable interiors, and the notion conveyed in Thomas Hope’s words that “... vases relate chiefly to Bacchanalian rites...Connected with the representation of mystic death and regeneration”.³³ An analysis of the subjects of the vases in the Buck portrait shows how in choosing these, in particular, the artist wished to convey the idea of death and rebirth, of rest and release from mortal pain. These themes are linked to the family group in the picture through the funerary *term* in the background showing the bust of a deceased child.

Two of the vases in Buck’s drawing are from the Hamilton collection, and in his *Vasengemälde* Boettiger drew extensively on the same source. By the 1820’s, however, the mystic approach to vase-painting was being condemned as an aimless folly. J. Millingen thought the progress of vase studies had been greatly hampered by it and he was unequivocal in his condemnation³⁴: “The vases, of which the origin is supposed to be so mysterious”, he writes, “are no others than the common pottery intended for the various purposes of life and for ornament, like the China and the Staffordshire ware of the present day”.

Millingen’s was an unusually practical mind, and the discovery of the Canino vases coincided with a new mood of positivism among the savants of the day.

29. Boettiger 1797-1800; Millin 1802-1806.

30. Haskell 1984.

31. Mitter 1977, Ch. II: ‘Eighteenth Century Antiquarians and Erotic Gods’.

32. For a bibliography of this drawing and a detailed discussion of its prosopography and iconography see Jenkins 1988.

33. Hope 1807, 23; Cf. Hamilton 1791, 42: “It is highly probable, that most of these vases served for sacred purposes, and were chiefly dedicated to the rites of Bacchus.”; Hamilton 1795, 6: “... the most probable conjecture is, that these sacred vases were placed in the sepulchres of such only of the deceased, as had been initiated in the great Eleusinian Mysteries ...”

34. Millingen 1822, iv-vi: “Another cause of the little progress in

the study of this branch of antiquity, may be ascribed to the opinion, that all the painted Fictile Vases we possess, were originally intended for use in the mystic ceremonies of Ceres and Bacchus; that the subjects represented on them, related to such ceremonies; and that they were placed in tombs as symbols that the deceased had been initiated. The number of Dionysiacal subjects, with which vases are adorned, gave rise, in great measure to this opinion, which, though totally unsupported by any ancient authority, has, most unaccountably, become so prevalent, that it extended even to Winckelmann, Visconti, and Zoëga, and probably induced those great luminaries of archaeological science, to neglect a class of monuments which offers so much interest”.



Fig. 5. Banqueteer and hetaira. Tondo of a red-figured cup attributed to Onesimos. (Ex-collection Durand). British Museum E44.

In presenting an entirely fresh repertoire of subjects, they usurped the importance that the Hamilton vases once had. The latter, associated as they were with outdated fashions and fancies were declared, for the time-being at least, obsolete. We are reminded of the manner in which the arrival of the Elgin Marbles in England, and their eventual purchase for the British Museum in 1816, was seen by some to usurp the position formerly held by Charles Townley's collection of classical sculpture.³⁵ Indeed, in terms of the development of taste and the history of scholarship the Canino vases may be seen to have made a shock-of-the-new impact similar to that of the Elgin Marbles. A grudging acknowledgement of the previous status of the Hamilton vases was still allowed upon aesthetic grounds, but even here the Durand vases might be held superior. Ed-

ward Hawkins, Keeper of Antiquities at the British Museum writes: "... independently of their high interest to the scholar ... (the Durand vases) are exactly such as there is at present a great anxiety to display before the great mass of the people, with a view to familiarize their eyes to fine forms, to improve their general taste and promote the production of elegant works in various branches of manufacture, and thereby enlarge the commerce of the country."³⁶

This last appeal to the improvement of the arts and the promotion of British manufacture is precisely that which Hamilton had made in the publication of his first vase collection prior to offering it for sale to the British Museum in 1772.³⁷ British commercial interest becomes a talking point also in the second Marquess of Northampton's statement upon the subject.³⁸ The Mar-

35. Cook 1977, pp. 34-5.

36. Loc. cit. note 25.

37. Vickers 1987.

38. BMA, OP, XIV, the 19th of April 1836.

quess was himself in the process of putting together a rich private collection of vases, mainly from the tombs at Vulci. These became known as the Castle Ashby vases, and the collection remained intact until 1980. He defines the purpose of a public collection of vases as “archaeological, artistical and commercial”. By *archaeological* he meant the study of iconography, on the one hand, and the process of manufacture, on the other; this he thought would appeal to a German government. Under the term *artistical* he again included the techniques of potting and painting, but also what he termed “the birth, progress, perfection and decline of design in the painting and potting of vases”. This he thought would appeal to an Italian or French government. Finally, *commercial* he defined as “the improvement of the designs of the forms of our own fictile manufacture”. This, he feared, would appeal most to an English House of Commons. Northampton went on to give a prescription for the different categories of vase he thought were needed to create such a representative collection.

The result of so much discussion was that Edward Hawkins and Brøndsted did go to Paris and they purchased on behalf of the British Museum around 400 vases at the Durand sale. These were not as many as they would have liked and not always of the same quality or interest. They were, however, the first major acquisition of vases since the purchase of Hamilton’s first collection more than a half-century earlier; their acquisition, moreover, represents a crucial stage in the development of what is now the British Museum’s great and representative collection.³⁹ The name of Sir William Hamilton is a familiar one to the British people, not least because of his notorious relationship with Emma Hamilton, and her association with Admiral Lord Nelson. However he is also known by many for his interest in Greek vases. The Chevalier Durand, by contrast, still less Peter Oluf Brøndsted, are hardly known in England outside the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum. I hope this paper will do something to advertise the importance of their contribution to the history of British collecting.

39. A number of not very distinguished vases had been acquired from Charles Townley’s estate in 1814 and through the Payne Knight bequest in 1824.