The Culture of Collecting in Roma: Between Politics and Administration

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The culture of collecting in Roma is a subject which has attracted the attention of scholars for a long time for its connection to the penetration of Hellenistic culture in Roma and, at the same time, to the political and economic expansion of the city. The origins of the phenomenon, indeed, can be identified in the stream of works of art that came from the conquest of the Mediterranean East (Strong, 1973; Carey, 2003: 79–91). Even in earlier times, during the conquest of the Italian peninsula, booty that included works of art was common and at least part of them were dedicated in sanctuaries of the city. Just to mention one of the most famous cases, consider the bronzes from Volsinii dedicated in 264 BCE by Marcus Fulvius Flaccus in the sanctuary of Fortuna and Mater Matuta near Sant’Omobono (Torelli, 1968). The importance, fame and quality of the works of art taken from the Greek East, however, were much greater and the phenomenon was part of a wider process of evolution of Roman society, in which the new models progressively diverged from the traditional culture.

The information about the arrival in Roma of the result of these conquests and the evolution of the collecting phenomenon are dispersed among a large number of sources. Of course the more systematic text which nobody can ignore is the naturalis historia of Plinius, who lists about one hundred and fifty works of art on display in Roma in less than fifty different locations, usually public monuments or at least places open to a select audience (Gualandi, 1982: Appendices A, B). Scrolling through the list (Gualandi, 1982: Appendix C), it is easy to observe that the most frequent location of sculptures and paintings is a temple or a religious complex. There are the temples of the Roman Forum, the Temple of Apollo on the Capitoline Hill, the Aedes Concordiae and the other shrines and temples while those in politically important official functions such as the Imperial Fora – particularly the Forum of Augustus and the Templum Pacis – or in the Campus Martius the Baths of Agrippa and the Theatre of Pompeius Magnus with the adjacent porticus (Castagnoli, 1982: 124–125; Liverani, 1989: 156 n. 40). A special case is that of the Monumenta Pollionis, the collection opened to the public by Asinius Pollio, the location of which is contested. There are indeed those who place it within the Atrium Libertatis, behind the Forum of Caesar, in the area later occupied by the Forum of Traianus, but it is better to site it in the Horti Asiniani on the Via Appia, an area later occupied by the Baths of Caracalla, where during the Renaissance the Farnese Bull was found, the greatest among Asinius’ sculptures (Grimal, 1984: 156; La Rocca, 1998: 228–239). We can compare this case to that of the sculptures in the Horti Serviliani, which in recent years have been fixed near the Vatican area (Steinby, 2003: 20–21). From the time of Nero they were an imperial property decorated by Praxiteles’ statues representing Flora, Ceres and Triptolemus, the seated Hestia by Skopas, the Kalamis’ Apollon, the Boxers by Dercylides and the portrait of Kallisthenes by Antistratos (Plinius, naturalis historia xxxvi.23, xxxvi.25, xxxvi.36).

The picture is fairly predictable: as the distribution map of Plinius’ data shows, the most famous collections are all in the central public areas. Of course the temples were privileged as anyone could offer a dedication there, unlike what happened in places of political importance or particularly representative spaces, which were subject to senatorial or imperial control. As a consequence, places with a political connotation received more meditated offerings – so to speak – since they did not derive from the initiative of a single private citizen, but rather are the expression of the will of a significant group – if not of all – of the citizens. This pattern is comparable with that common in Greece, where the dedications begin within the shrines and temples while those in politically important
places appear at a later time, starting with the dedication of the Athenian group of the Tyrrannicides (Hölscher, forthcoming).

In the latter case the dedications seldom consist of famous works of art, but more often of triumphal spoils, as with the beaks of the ships of Antium and Carthago on the tribune of the Rostra and the column of Caius Duilius, or as with statues by unknown authors, but with an evident symbolic meaning due to their iconography, so that I would hesitate to consider them as part of the collecting phenomenon in a strict sense.

An observation of a different type concerns the status of the work, which changes considerably once the system of triumphal spoils has been established. With some simplifications, in the pre-collecting phase – so to speak – a sculpture or a painting was generally commissioned to a contemporary artist for a specific purpose – an honorary monument, a memorial one or a public building – and consequently with clear indications and purposes on the part of the patron. On the contrary, the choice of the place for works from war booty, or acquired on the market, concerned sculptures and paintings which already had a series of dimensional, formal and historical constraints, that restricted or directed potential reuse in a new location.

From a semiotic point of view the works obtained as spoils of war imply a reference to a place and a time different from that of the creation of the work, for instance the conquest of a city. In this way a second level of meaning – e.g. the commemoration of a victory – was superimposed on the original meaning – e.g. a mythological representation or the memory of a historical figure – and on aesthetic values – e.g. the fame of a renowned sculptor. This over-determination, or hyper-codification, can obscure or conceal the original meaning.

For instance Plinius expressly admits that the author of the statue of Hercules dressed in a tunic on the Rostra in the Roman Forum was no longer known; he was also struck by its unusual iconography – which apparently nobody could explain. On the other hand he is able to report in detail the various steps of its recent history, recorded by three successive inscriptions mentioning its presence among the spoils of Lucullus, its dedication by the general’s son, its return to the public enjoyment after a probably abusive privatization (Plinius, naturalis historia xxxiv.93).

A sort of desamantisation (Courtés, 1992: 240; Greimas, 1991: 176–177) occurs: the specific meaning goes out of focus and only a more generic one remains. The Apoxyomenos is no longer the monument of a wrestler with a personal identity, dedicated on the occasion of a victory in a specific competition: it becomes the statue of an athlete, an illustrious sample of the art of Lysippos, suitable to decorate the area in front of the Baths of Agrippa (Bravi, 2012: 137–139). Even in the case of the Monumenta Pollionis the memory of the sculptors survives – among them were Praxiteles, Skopas and Kephisodotos, perhaps mentioned by inscriptions – but the provenance is lacking for almost all of them. The specific meaning and the original function of the sculptures went lost; only the artistic value and the iconography and style were preserved, allowing us to read these sculptures according to the categories of the decor (Hölscher, 2004: 22–23; Bravi, 2012: 9–27) in the new context into which they were transferred.

In extreme cases it could happen that interpretations of dubious origin cover and replace the original meaning in order to explain a posteriori one feature or another of which the memory went lost. This is the process anthropologists call iconatrophy (Vansina, 1985: 10, 44–45, 157–158, 187–188), attested for instance in Roman imperial age writers’ readings of some archaic Greek sculpture, as shown by Catherine Keesling (2005; cf. also Liverani, forthcoming).

In short: the interpretation of the figurative program of collections and their political and ideological values needs to take into account the shift of meanings and contexts, a process that sometimes has quite a rapid evolution.

On the other hand we should not underestimate the importance of other elements intimately connected to the phenomenon of collecting, which are not always treated specifically in the studies, but which deserve close attention because of their implications. At first glance these elements could look like mere antiquarian curiosities or technical details of minor importance. I am thinking more specifically about issues related to the management and administration of such collections, a subject on which we unfortunately have scarce and controversial evidence.

At the beginning of the last century a lively discussion addressed the topic (Detlefsen, 1901; Detlefsen, 1905; Hauser, 1905; Beaujeu, 1982). Detlefsen hypothesized the existence in Roma of censor lists, administrative inventories maybe used as sources for those parts of the naturalis historia where Plinius describes the works of art in Roma. Hauser, instead, even considering probable the existence of inventory lists of gifts in temples and public collections, considered it unlikely that they recorded data of interest to archaeologists or art historians.

More recently, the issue was revived in a rich and stimulating article by Adriano La Regina (1991), who re-examined a number of epigraphic indications engraved