Curators and collectors must exercise caution when contemplating proposed acquisitions. I hope that this brief discussion of a group of purportedly Egyptian objects will be of interest to Jack, to whose hospitality I have often been indebted. This note is also intended to provide information regarding material that may yet appear on the art market.

The Acquisition of the “Amarna Princess” by Bolton Museum

In January 2002, the Keeper of Egyptology at Bolton Museum was asked by a Mr. George Greenhalgh, from the Bolton suburb of Bromley Cross, to look at a “statue.” The piece (figs. 1-4) was 51 cm high and carved from a creamy, semi-translucent stone. Mr. Greenhalgh stated that his great-grandfather, a mill owner, had acquired the statue in 1892 at the sale of Silverton Park in Devon, the seat of the fourth Earl of Egremont (1785-1845), and produced a copy of the sale catalogue to corroborate this. The statue was part of lot 201, “eight Egyptian figures.” He had no idea what the statue was, and had been offered a negligible sum by an antiques dealer for it as a garden ornament. The statue depicted a woman wearing a clinging, pleated garment that covered the body and left arm from the shoulders down. The figure’s head, right arm, left forearm and hand, and calves and feet were missing; the stump of a sidelock of hair was preserved on the right shoulder. The left leg was slightly advanced, and a rectangular slab of negative space occupied the area beneath the left buttock. The object was identified as an Egyptian alabaster figure of a royal woman from the Amarna Period, citing parallels in Philadelphia and Paris; the breakages to the left-hand side of the body indicated that it came from a group of several figures. As such, it was acquired by Bolton Museum through the auction house Christie’s in September 2003 for £439,767, the equivalent of £500,000 (c. $800,000) after tax breaks designed to encourage outstanding works of art to stay in Britain. The statue was purchased with £75,000 given by the private charity The National Art Collections Fund, and £360,767 by the government-funded National Heritage Memorial Fund; the statue received assessments for both groups. The remaining £4,000 was given by the Friends of Bolton Museum and another Bolton trust.

The statue, dubbed the “Amarna Princess,” was displayed in 2003 at an exhibition celebrating the centenary of the National Art Collections Fund, and returned to Bolton in January 2004. The Keeper of Egyptology retired in 2005 and was succeeded by the author at the end of that year.