Introduction

Sculptors and stone-carvers during the Renaissance and Baroque were the creators of antique art as conceived during that period. Fragments found at excavations in Roman sites were interpreted, cleaned and restored. Interpretations regarding the motif formed the basis for the reconstructions. Cleaning was often done with acids, which according to modern standards is a destructive method. It had the advantage of rapidly dissolving crusts and discoloration and giving back to the marble a white appearance. Any polychromy was dissolved as well, but as painted statuary was not considered at the time, no one reflected on preserving any traces of paint. The reconstruction process usually began with an antique torso or a larger fragment of the body of the statue and some broken arms and legs. These were assembled by the sculptor according to his conception of the antique, of anatomy, the articulations of the body and of beauty. Any missing parts were sculpted anew, and the head might even originate from another statue. The resultant work of art had to be complete, intact and white.

Famous and gifted artists of the period created statues and statue groups that ever since have thrilled spectators with their elegance and beauty, their joyous or dramatic effects. Less gifted sculptors created good work, and craftsmen made acceptable reconstructions. Recreated or reconstructed marble statuary now appear within this range of artistic competence. We find them in museums and private collections. Some of these works of art became the showpieces in large collections others were given the role of background decorations. Collecting fragments of antique art and using these as decorative elements in impressive or elegant settings was a way of manifesting personal wealth and power and, as has often been pointed out, the desire of the leading class of the period of manifesting affinity to the ancient Romans. Recent studies of museum collections has led to a deepened understanding of the Renaissance and Baroque periods as manifested in architectural design and artistic settings. Less is known about collections in private possession. Therefore, the possibility of starting an interdisciplinary project at the Palazzo Lancellotti ai Coronari was a unique opportunity to study a historic collection of marble sculpture.

The Palazzo Lancellotti ai Coronari is a little treasure chest that contains a collection of antiquities saved from the march of time and human events. Not that it has passed entirely unscathed across the centuries from its foundation in the 17th century until today. It has been added to by inheritance or subtracted from by selling off pieces to cover debts or even, more recently, for reasons of political ideology (one is reminded of the sale of the Discobolos to Hitler in 1938). These are the natural internal dynamics that characterize any collection. The Lancellotti has been spared the fate of the greater part of other art collections around the world that usually end up being sold off and dispersed. Sometimes even the buildings in which they were housed are destroyed.

The splendor of these collections comes down to us today in only a few scraps, from which industrious researchers try to reconstruct original arrangements from archival documents. On Palazzo Lancellotti’s history and its art, it is to Patrizia Cavazzini’s merit to have been brought back to light from a careful consultation of the family archives. In our study, still preliminary, Hedvig Landenius Enegren treats specifically the history of the antiquities collection. In the following definitive publication of this material, Paolo Liverani will treat the pieces that eventually ended up at the Vatican Museums.

The idea of cataloguing, photographing and publishing the Lancellotti collection of antiquities was first raised in 1997 when, with the encouragement of Patrizia Cavazzini, Marcello Barbanera undertook a complete photographic survey of the ancient pieces in the collection. This work was supported by the University of Rome “La Sapienza” in the hopes of its being published. Therefore, he welcomed the initiative of Agneta Freccero and the Swedish Institute in Rome who, in 2002, demonstrating interest in the collection, started a research and conservation project in association with the University of Göteborg. The urgent need for conservation was the decisive factor. The materials used in earlier restorations were deteriorating and elements of the statues falling apart. In order to ovoid misunderstandings we will point out that word conservation, which is used in Anglo-Saxon languages, is more or less equivalent to the Italian restauro (restoration), while the word restoration is used for treatments that imply that some kind of reconstruction is made.

The Swedish Institute in Rome is the basis for this research project that includes historians of art, architects, archeologists, chemists, conservators and epigraphists.

The nucleus of this project consists of the Swedish Institute in Rome in alliance with Prince Pietro Lancellotti, the conservators Silvia Gambardella and Alessandro Danesi with the approval of Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma and with the involvement of the Institute of Conservation, Göteborg University and students studying the conservation of classical statuary. Scholars from the
following institutes and institutions in Italy, Norway and Sweden also collaborated: Stockholm University, Oslo University, Università la Sapienza, Roma, Università di Foggia, Musei Vaticani, Norska institutet i Rom, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR) Istituto della Conservazione e Valorizzazione dei Beni Culturali (ICVBC) in Florence and Rome.

The studies thus far in the project concern the courtyard as representative of the period, the Lancellotti collection specifically and also the care of private collections of antiquities in Rome. Another basic study carried out during the recent conservation intervention concerns the investigation of previous restoration materials and techniques understood in their historical contexts. These studies aim at giving a framework for the contributions on individual pieces. Eleven works of art at the west wall of the courtyard have been in focus. These represent common types of ancient Roman art transformed by 16th century artists according to the prevalent taste of the period.

In the present research project, the collaboration of researchers with a variety of competences figures as a rare occasion for the study of a collection of antiquities as a unique context in which each activity comes to light in the just cultural value through time: the question of the modern restorations (since the sixteenth century) and their techniques, the value of the antiquities in the image of the collector and their use in the exposition within a building, the history of the collection, and naturally the interpretation of works of art.

The scientific committee, eventually widened to include colleagues from many prestigious institutions, has guided the project with useful advice on all the phases of the publication. The committee is formed by Paolo Liverani of the Pontifical Museums and Galleries, Vatican, Ingrid Rowland from the American Academy in Rome, Elisabeth Kieven from the Hertziana Library, Rome, Marcello Barbanera of the University of Rome “La Sapienza”, Barbro Santillo Frizell of the Swedish Institute of Rome, Patrizia Cavazzini, Silvia Danesi, DART, Hedvig Landenius Enegren and Agneta Freccero of the Swedish Institute in Rome.

This first publication, in both its on-line version and printed version, has been conceived as a work in progress. It is a demonstration of how in a relatively brief time span one can achieve concrete results which readers can immediately judge for themselves.

We hope that the definitive publication of the Lancellotti collection might follow without great delay. It is clear, however, that it will require even greater efforts than those already invested in the present work, not only of a research nature but also financial that goes beyond the good will of single participants of this initiative.

The realization of this publication would not have been possible without the constant and enthusiastic collaboration of Prince Pietro Lancellotti, to whom we express our gratitude. We wish to thank as well Dr. Maria Rita Sanzi Di Mino, director of the Instituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, for having permitted the publication of their photos of works of art in the Lancellotti collection. This work would not have been carried through without the constant support of the Swedish Institute, its director Prof. Barbro Santillo Frizell and its staff, including Stefania Renzetti for administration issues of diplomatic formulations, translations, and requests for permissions, Margaret Olsson Lepschey for the accounting and insurance, and Astrid Capoferro and Pia Letalick regarding the library.

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Marcello Barbanera & Agneta Freccero

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