

---

## A Brief History of European Antiquarianism Until The 18<sup>th</sup> Century

Yrd Doç. Dr. Figen Furtuna ERDOĐDU\*  
Kafkas Üniversitesi  
Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi  
Arkeoloji ve Sanat Tarihi Bölümü

**Abstract:** *It has been the source of attraction as a sign of richness and power for people throughout history to own antiquities and exhibit them in convenient conditions. Today the yearning for such a collection, without losing its meaning as in the past and even with an increasing trend, still continues to keep its charm. Thus, this article not only focuses upon how this interest gained acceleration with the emergence of Enlightenment and Geographical discoveries during the period of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, but it also examines chronologically the history of collecting antiquities until the eighteenth century by giving examples.*

**Key words:** *treasure house, collectors, antiquities, collections, sculptures, museum, Renaissance*

### **Avrupada Antikacılığın 18.Yüzyıla Kadar Kısa Bir Tarihçesi**

**Öz:** *Antik eserlere sahip olmak ve onları uygun şartlarda sergilemek, zenginlik ve güçlülüğün de bir göstergesi olarak, yüzyıllardır insanlar için oldukça cazip olmuştur. Günümüzde de koleksiyonculuk geçmişindeki anlamından fazla bir şey kaybetmeden, hatta daha da artarak, cazibesini korumaya devam etmektedir.*

*Bu makalede klasik çağlardan başlayan bu ilginin Ortaçağ ve Rönesans döneminde aydınlanma çağıyla ve coğrafi keşiflerle beraber ivme kazanması irdelenerek, on sekizinci yüzyıla kadar olan dönem içerisinde antik eser koleksiyonculuğunun tarihi kronolojik olarak örneklerle değerlendirilmektedir.*

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *Hazine binası, koleksiyoncular, antikalar, koleksiyonlar, heykeller, müze, Rönesans.*

---

\* Kafkas Üniversitesi Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi Arkeoloji ve Sanat Tarihi Bölümü. Kars

Since classical antiquity there has always been an interest in curiosities, both natural and artefactual. It has been known that collecting antiquities and other artefacts attracted enormous attention over the centuries and till now. There are many private collections, collectors and public museums in the world trying to enrich their collections. This subject is chosen with the idea in mind that it might have popularity today as in the ancient times. It is for this reason that the history of collecting antiquities and other artefacts since classical times may be still the concern of some people. In the following paragraphs the history of collecting classical antiquities will be dealt chronologically and briefly.

The dedications in the ancient Greek temples formed the first well-known collections, in which public treasures, votive offerings, statues, spoils of war, gifts and curiosities were kept. This tradition of collecting was followed by the Romans on a prodigious scale. The conquest of Greece and Asia Minor brought many works of art to Rome. For example Sulla had a huge collection from the plunder of Delos and Corinth. Cicero owned eighteen villas filled with works of art (Wittlin, 1949: 15). Sulla's example was followed by many of the Roman emperors, and antiquities were transported to Rome from all round the Empire.

During the Middle Ages in the princely courts of European interest in antiquities, past relics, and curiosities was aroused. Numbers of collections were gathered by princes and aristocrats in order to embellish their palaces. However, a fundamental change in impetus came with the Renaissance. From the fifteenth century onwards, the numbers of classical and curiosity collections also, with natural and artificial objects, increased in Italy and all round Europe. Increased building activity in Rome in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries resulted in much ground being opened up, revealing antiquities. This in turn stimulated interest in the ancient past. For example, Cardinal Domenico Grimani possessed a great number of sculptures and other antiquities recovered from the foundation of his palace in Rome, reported by a contemporary author in 1505 (Wittlin, 1949: 104). Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries the collecting habit peaked, particularly in England, and during the eighteenth century many aristocratic collections were formed in England as a result of the 'Grand Tour'.

When we say 'antiquarianism' the first impression that comes to mind is the antiquities of Italy, especially Rome, then Greece, Turkey and the Levant. Prior to the sixteenth century, collections amounting to what we would now call museums were unknown. There were royal treasuries (the treasure chamber) in every country of Europe, containing regalia alongside vessels of precious metals, plate, and coins, some of which were gifts from foreign princes and dignitaries which, had they been publicly displayed, would have formed splendid exhibitions (Macgregor, 1983: 70). The idea of public exhibition was, however, as foreign to the curators of these treasure-houses as it was to those responsible for their enrichment (Macgregor, 1983: 70). But in later times the value of treasures shifted from the material to the symbolic: objects were associated with certain national events and outstanding personages of the past (Wittlin, 1949: 16).

As early as the late 8th century, Charlemagne (742-814), the ruler of the Franks in Northern Europe, sent agents to Italy in search of objects of art (Wittlin, 1949: 103-104).

There had also been medieval church collections in the Middle Ages. Greater public accessibility was afforded by other collections which grew up within certain medieval cathedrals and churches: for example, the monasteries of Saint Denis in France and San Marco at Venice were both renowned for their treasures (Macgregor, 1983: 70). Art treasures which since the Middle Ages had been accumulated in the churches of Venice were first sequestered by the Venetian Republic, then in 1657 sold to defray some of expenses of the war against the Turks (Wittlin, 1949: 102).

By the Middle Ages much of ancient Rome had fallen into ruin. In Rome, large-scale antiquarian collecting dates back at least to the 11th century, when Nicolas Crescentius had remains of ancient buildings in his house (Wittlin, 1949: 41). The oldest extensive collection known belonged to a wealthy citizen of Treviso, Oliviero Forza, who collected ancient medals, coins, marbles, and manuscripts in c. 1335. Today only a list survives in which the collector named things he wished to purchase; he also mentions other contemporary collections in Venice (Wittlin, 1949: 41).

Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Franks and the Venetians ruled much of Greece. Ancient Greek works of art probably found their way west during that time. However, very little is known about such trade. Italian artists such as Nicola Pisano (1225-1284) and Donatello (1386-1466) might have drawn inspiration from imported antiquities, such as Greco-Italic objects excavated in Italy or Byzantine objects which were still strongly imbued with the Classical tradition (Archibald, 1991: 30). After the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Turks overran the Peloponnese and mainland Greece within a few years, and access to Greek antiquities remained limited until the 19th century (Archibald, 1991: 30). But the acquisition of ancient remains by travellers can be traced back to the fifteenth century, when the humanist, Ciriaco of Ancona, gathered inscriptions, statuary and coins on his journies in Greece and the Near East (Wittlin, 1949: 104).

Jean de France, Duke of Berry (1340-1416), was one of the later medieval secular princes generally recognised as the forerunners of the great princely collectors of the Renaissance (Macgregor, 1983: 70). He possessed antique coins, sculpture, and vases obtained through agents who were sent especially for the purpose of acquiring them. While Jean de Berry's collection was accumulated with the intention that it should be observed and enjoyed, those admitted to see it must have been few (Macgregor, 1983: 70).

By the Renaissance, collecting developed as an activity for wealthy people. But patronage was more important than collecting in the early years of the fifteenth century. Later on, especially in the second half of that century, collecting was identified as a distinct activity (Hooper and Greenhill, 1992: 65). A variety of specimens, natural or artificial, and objects of art, as well as mechanical and religious idols were collected by people. By the end of the sixteenth century such collections and museums had become fairly commonplace in Europe (Hooper and Greenhill, 1992: 78). By the early part of that century the palaces of princes, wealthy merchants, and clerics in Rome, Venice and

Tuscany were filled with relics of ancient Rome - coins, medals, sculpture and inscriptions. In Florence one of the most famous merchant families were the Medici, who will be discussed briefly below. Furthermore some famous artists of the Renaissance, for example Ghiberti, Squarcione, Mantegna, Lombardi and others, assembled ancient statues in their studios and were inspired by them and by the idea of being their descendants. During the Renaissance, the word 'cabinet' came into use, for a container, generally a cupboard with drawers and shelves, used to hold a collection of small things. In Renaissance Italy, the export of works of art by foreign buyers was prohibited by a pontifical order of 1534, a ban which in practice had only limited effect (Wittlin, 1949: 41).

In Rome in the second half of the fifteenth century the collecting of antiquities was far less common than in Florence. Pietro Barbo (Pope Paul II, 1464-71) collected a large number of gems, coins and small bronzes. His successor, Sixtus IV (1471-84) showed no interest in them and allowed the antiquities to be dispersed, a large proportion being taken to Florence by Lorenzo de Medici. Sixtus IV's successor, Pius II Piccolomini, also showed an interest in Roman antiquities and collected interesting pieces. Pope Julius II (previously Cardinal Giuliano della Rovera) collected sculptures either derived from excavations or bought from existing collections. He also commissioned the architect, Bramante, to modify a villa in the Vatican Palace for the display of sculptures. The villa was known as the Belvedere. His successor, Leo X (1512-21), was more keen to increase his own collection rather than that of the Vatican. Pope Paul III (1534-49) and his nephew built up the first private collection of classical sculpture in Rome (Haskell and Penny, 1981: 8, 10, 11). Besides the Vatican, there were five other major collections belonging to noble Italian families, all of which had strong connections with the papal court: the Farnese, the Medici, the Borghese, the Ludovisi and the Barberini (Archibald, 1992: 36). The collection of Michele Mercati (1541-93) appears to be a secular collection in Rome. He was a physician and curator of the Vatican botanic garden. He formed a collection which embraced both natural rarities and antiquities, including mummies and flint implements (Macgregor, 1982: 72).

In Florence the most famous merchant family of the Renaissance were the Medici. In the fifteenth century, the Medici created a famous collection of books, icons, paintings and sculptures in Florence. It was started by the banker, Cosimo de Medici (1389-1464), and was carried on by his son Piero de Medici (1419-69) and in turn by his grandson, Lorenzo the Magnificent (1448-92) (Tait, 1989: 2). By the end of the century, the Medici collection was the finest in Italy, and included coins, gems, glass and sarcophagi as well as statuary (Archibald, 1991: 32). Lorenzo appears to have used the collection of ancient marbles in his gardens mainly as a training ground for young artists; visitors were permitted to view the collections in the ducal palace as early as the sixteenth century (Wittlin, 1949: 110). Cosimo de Medici also used the word 'museum' for his private collection of codices and curiosities. In the 16th century Cosimo de Medici (1519-1574), another Medici family member, obtained South American objects, and under his sons, Francesco and Ferdinand, the collection was also augmented by material from Africa, India, China and Japan. Natural history specimens and antiquities were added. When the Treasure-House or *ceimeliarcha* was visited by the diarist John Evelyn in 1644, its

character was predominantly that of an art-historical collection. Evelyn wrote that "...hundreds of admirable Antiquities, Statues of Marble & Mettal, Vasas of porphyry... Pictures... of the famous persons & Illustrious men, whither excelling in Arts or Armes to the number of 300..." were to be found in the collection (Macgregor, 1983: 72). The Medici Palace in Florence has been called the first museum of Europe. It was the first house in Florence to be built on what are now seen as Renaissance principles; it must have been unique at that time in its size and height, in its use of decorative motifs on the exterior walls and spaces, in the richly decorated interior spaces, and in the extensive accumulation of material goods (Hooper and Greenhill, 1992: 26). The Medici collection was also important for its arrangement of objects of art and specimens according to their artistic qualities. In the Palazzo Pitti in Florence statues were placed in the 'Galleria' which was especially built for the purpose by Vasari (1511-1574) (Wittlin, 1949: 88).

In France, François I developed an intense interest in classical statuary shortly before the 1540s. The initial stimulus probably came from the Italians. Around 1518-19 the King owned no marble sculpture, ancient or modern. François' court artist, Primaticcio, convinced the King to send him to Italy in order to draw antiquities and to give advice on possible purchases. He carried out both of these tasks along with taking moulds from the most famous antique statues in the city and sending them to France. Taking plaster casts from original pieces was an expensive operation in the middle of the sixteenth century, but it was an essential step in spreading a wider appreciation of the most esteemed antique sculptures. Primaticcio along with the casts of famous sculptures managed to obtain about 125 marbles for the king (Haskell and Penny, 1981: 2-4). Two of the later rulers of France, Louis XIV and then Napoleon, were to try and emulate François' example and to transfer the prestige of Rome to France by transferring the former's ancient monuments (Haskell and Penny, 1981: 5).

The sixteenth and seventeenth century saw greater interest in encyclopedic learning, and the creation of collections of 'Naturalia' and 'Artificialia' which contained an almost unlimited variety of specimens of nature, objects of art, mechanical inventions and religious idols (Wittlin, 1949: 3). Collections were opened up in many parts of Europe gathering together many varieties of natural life, rarities and antiquities from all around the world. In Austria under the Hapsburg dynasty, the imperial family founded several collections. The Hapsburgs were as important to the development of collecting in Austria as the Medici were in Italy. In Germany, in Munich, Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria (1528-79) centred on antiquities, including bronzes and busts; in Prague Rudolph II (1552-1612) established at the Hradschin Palace one of the most impressive artistic centres of his time; and in Heidelberg the elector Karl Ludwig (1632-80) developed a cabinet with coins and other antiquities from Italy. Although these collections contained mainly rarities and natural objects, they also accommodated antiquities. Many other collections of this type were formed in Holland, Denmark, France and England (Macgregor, 1983: 70-97). Voyages of acquisition were made to the Americas and to the Far East, and to China and Japan and to Africa. The methods of acquisition were mainly personal contact with ambassadors and overseas merchants, sometimes via missionary priests as well as by gifts and exchanges between collectors, by written appeals and the foreign travel of

individuals. Furthermore, shops sprang up in the course of the seventeenth century to cater for this developing market. Evelyn (1645) records that purchases were made by collectors in Pozzuoli and in the Piazza Navona in Rome, the latter crowded with merchants selling antiquities, medals and other curiosities (Macgregor, 1983: 90).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many collections were also founded by scientists satisfying curiosity and scientific investigation. But none of these early continental collections have survived intact; most were dispersed completely, although fragments of a few were incorporated into later collections (Wittlin, 1949: 65). The traveller-collector was a well-known figure in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Students of medicine and natural history in particular collected a variety of archaeological and ethnographical material, as well as specimens of botanical interest and of minerals. Travellers and explorers bought back many items, including specimens from Africa, South America, China, Japan and the Pacific Islands. Likewise botanists and zoologists shipped their finds back to their home countries (Hudson, 1975: 53). Later on many such collections were sold to other students or persons of a high social rank. In England the origins of the main museums lie with the collections of scientists and travellers, in other words, with private collections. However, the situation is different in Continental Europe; the majority of the great museums represent the transformation of the former collections of kings and princes. Especially during the second half of the 19th century, wealthy men started to bequeath their collections, usually to their local town, and with the instructions that these collections should be used for 'educational' and 'scientific' purposes (Hudson, 1975: 55).

The most important French collector of the early seventeenth century was Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637). He was a councillor in the Parliament of Aix-en-Provence and one of the great scholar-collectors of natural history, astronomy, antiquities, numismatics and linguistics. He enjoyed presenting his antiquities, specimens of nature and books to other students and collectors. One of his agents, a man named Samson, was sent out to search for antiquities and curiosities in Turkey. He unearthed many Greek marbles, these were eventually bought for the Earl of Arundel, and became part of the 'Arundel Marbles' noted below (Macgregor, 1983: 82). Another remarkable French collection was made by M. le Comte de Caylus, the eighteenth century scholar and traveller, who collected many specimens of classical archaeology during excavations in Asia Minor (Greenfield, 1989: 249).

As mentioned above, in a time when there were limited facilities for travel, ambassadors abroad often acted as agents in acquiring specimens. For example, the Earl of Arundel, Charles I's emissary to the continent in 1636, sent paintings home from Vienna, the Netherlands and other places (Wittlin, 1949: 96). The earliest European public or 'national' collection of antiquities all date from the early seventeenth century. This was the time when royal emissaries were employed by the English and French courts (Bahn, 1996: 34). Sir Thomas Roe, British ambassador at Istanbul from 1621 to 1628, acted as agent for two great English collectors, the Duke of Buckingham and Thomas Howard (1585-1646), the second Earl of Arundel. In England, collecting classical sculpture starts with Thomas Howard. He was one of the earliest collectors and the first person to bring

inscribed Greek marbles from Italy to England. When he was in Rome who acquired permission from the papal authorities to conduct excavations and discovered a buried room containing Roman portrait sculptures (Bahn, 1996: 34). But his collection also increased with purchases, gifts from other collectors and copies of ancient works of art. To house his growing collection, Howard added a long sculpture gallery to Arundel House in London (Bahn, 1996: 34). Furthermore, as mentioned, he commissioned Sir Thomas Roe, who was then the ambassador to the Sublime Porte (the Ottoman Court at Istanbul), to collect sculpture on his behalf. Later on he also sent his Chaplain, William Petty, to Istanbul. Petty visited Izmir where he bought a substitute collection that was originally intended for the connoisseur, Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc. Arundel's 'Marbles' consisted of 250 inscriptions, 37 statues, 28 busts and miscellaneous items such as sarcophagi and altars. Among these were parts of the Hellenistic Gigantomachy relief from the Great Altar at Pergamon (Bahn, 1996: 34). While Thomas Howard is remembered for his outstanding collections of statuary, engraved gems, paintings and manuscripts, he showed no recorded interest in rarities (Macgregor, 1983: 84).

England was famous in the seventeenth century for another important collection, the 'Musaeum Tradescantianum'. The word 'musaeum' first entered the English language in 1656 with the collection of 'John Tradescant's Musaeum Tradescantianum' which later became the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Tradescant was a diplomat and naturalist who opened the first public museum in England (Hudson, 1987: 21). The Tradescants, John Tradescant the Elder (d. 1638) and his son John the Younger (1608-1662) built up a collection during their travels in Europe, Russia, Turkey and Egypt and collected specimens of the rare and curious. It was also the first modern museum specifically designed to display its collections organized for teaching purposes (Hudson, 1987: 21). Although the collection was not the earliest one in London it was for a time the best known (Macgregor, 1983: 84).

It has been shown above that collecting antiquities and other artefacts were alluring habit that interested many levels of people since ancient times. Sometimes the objects were of curious or archaeological nature. During the Middle Ages and especially with the emergence enlightenment and geographical discoveries collecting was continued to gain more popularity than before. Renaissance was the time for learning. Many grounds were opened for antiquities. People started to show interest in the ancient past. Numerous collections were opened up throughout Europe and England. A strong interest in collecting had developed into the eighteenth century. European antiquarianism peaked in the eighteenth and nineteenth century when the trade in antiquities became a common feature throughout Europe and numerous private collections were established.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Archibald, Z. *Ancient Greeks*. London: Quarto,1991.
- Bahn, P. G. (ed). *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Arhaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Greenfield, J. *The Return of Cultural Treasures*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Haskel F., and Penny N. *Taste and the Antique. The Lure of Classical Sculpture 1500-1900*. London: Yale University Press, 1981.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. *Museum and Shapping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Hudson, K. *Museum of Influence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Macgregor, A. Collectors and collections of rarities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In Macgregor, A.(ed.), *Tradescant's Rarities*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983. 70-97.
- Tait, S. *The Places of Discovery*. London: Quiller Press, 1989.
- Wittlin, A. S. *The Museum. Its History and Its Task in Education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949.
- \*Kafkas Universitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Öğretim Üyesi. Kars 36100