Les Carnets de l'ACoSt

Association for Coroplastic Studies

17 | 2018

Varia

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/acost/1086>

DOI: 10.4000/acost.1086

ISSN: 2431-8574

Publisher

ACoSt

Electronic reference

Elena Khodza, « The P.A. Sabouroff Collection of Ancient Terracottas from The State Hermitage Museum », *Les Carnets de l'ACoSt* [Online], 17 | 2018, Online since 10 April 2018, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/acost/1086> ; DOI : 10.4000/acost.1086

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

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The P.A. Sabouroff Collection of Ancient Terracottas from The State Hermitage Museum

Elena Khodza

- 1 Pyotr Alexandrovich Sabouroff (1835–1918), well-known Russian diplomat and statesman, formed his collection of Greek and Roman terracottas, as well as vases and sculpture in marble and bronze, predominantly in Greece, when he was the Russian ambassador and plenipotentiary minister from 1870 to 1879. His entire collection was then acquired by the Imperial Hermitage in 1884, by which time the Hermitage's collection of terracottas was already very well known and admired by scholars and collectors, especially for the high quality of its Tanagra figurines. The Sabouroff figurines, newly acquired by the Hermitage, far surpassed any other examples that already were in the collection, making the Imperial Hermitage's holdings of figurative terracottas one of the most outstanding in Europe for the time.
- 2 The decade that Sabouroff had spent in Greece was witness to the widespread, unregulated, and destructive pillage of the necropoleis of ancient Tanagra that fed a lucrative art market dominated by Hellenistic figurines. These figurines captivated the attention not only of archaeologists and collectors, but also of a wide range of art lovers. The fact that Sabouroff was in Greece in the early years of this pillage allowed him to acquire superb examples of 'Tanagras,' as they had become known, before forgeries began to flood the art market because of the huge demand that these figurines had generated.
- 3 In negotiating for the sale of his collection of terracottas to the Imperial Hermitage, Sabouroff imposed as an obligatory condition the completion of the scholarly catalogue in two volumes — already underway at that time — of his entire collection of ancient works of art, for which Adolf Furtwängler was the author.¹ Some 130 years have passed since Furtwängler completed his catalogue, and the need to re-evaluate the Sabouroff collection in a full and modern publication has become evident. In accordance with the aesthetic preferences of his time, Furtwängler had concentrated most of his attention on Tanagras and other terracottas in the Tanagra style, thereby omitting a number of other

works of considerable interest. Consequently, some 50 terracottas in the new catalogue are published for the first time. In addition, the new catalogue contains the results of modern methods of physical and chemical analyses that have been applied to ancient terracottas during the course of the later twentieth century. The most important among these has been thermoluminescence, which exposes modern forgeries. Other kinds of analyses — microscopic and microchemical wet test of pigments, scanning electron microscopic investigation, x-ray fluorescent analysis (XRF), IR Fourier microscopy (FTIR microscopy), Raman spectroscopy, etc. — in some cases have allowed us to see these objects with new eyes and to understand more completely the changes that they have undergone over time.

Fig. 1. Ephedrismos. Corinth. Late 4th –early 3rd century B.C.E. Inv. GR 5390

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Fig. 2. TWO TANAGRAS. TANAGRA. 330–250 B.C.E. INV. GR 5362 (LEFT), GR 5251 (RIGHT)

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- 4 The catalogue consists of two parts and three appendices. The first part comprises two chapters that focus on several periods of Sabouroff's life and the events accompanying the purchase of the works that formed his collection. This includes the correspondence between Sabouroff and the participants in this process: the then director of the Imperial Hermitage Alexander A. Vasilchikov, the Minister of the Imperial Court Illarion I. Vorontsov-Dashkov, the State Secretary Alexander A. Polovtsov, and the assistant keeper of classical antiquities Gangolf E. Kizeritsky. The latter was responsible for the dispatch of the terracottas to Russia from Germany, where Sabouroff's diplomatic career was drawing to a close. All of these documents are held by the Archives of The State Hermitage Museum.
- 5 The second chapter describes the nature of the collection, with an emphasis on its most important sections. Since this publication is not aimed exclusively at a narrow circle of specialists, the text includes general information on the main trends in the development of ancient coroplastics as represented by objects in the Sabouroff collection.
- 6 A detailed catalogue of the whole collection makes up the second part of the publication. In addition to previously unpublished works of art, the catalogue includes a special section devoted to the 19th-century forgeries, for which it is sometimes possible to trace from whom and when Sabouroff acquired them. Such pieces were inevitably to be found in all collections of Greek terracottas formed during the last quarter of the 19th century. In their own way, they are of considerable interest for information on the aesthetic preferences of the age.
- 7 The first appendix provides a brief outline of the techniques of production. The second consists of a concordance of inventory numbers, numbers according to the old register of ancient terracottas that entered the Hermitage from private collections and other

museums, numbers in the first register of the Sabouroff collection (in the Archives of The State Hermitage Museum), and catalogue numbers. The third appendix comprises microphotos of the figurines in reflected light, Mag. 40^x – 100^x, taken in the Department of Examination / Authentication of Works of Art at The State Hermitage Museum, which make it possible to show examples of the layered painting on some of the figurines.

NOTES

1. Furtwängler A. 1883–1887. Die Sammlung Sabouroff: Kunstdenkmäler aus Griechenland, 2 vols. Berlin: Asher.

ABSTRACTS

The Sabouroff collection was formed in Greece by Pyotr A. Sabouroff (1835–1918), Russian diplomat and statesman, between 1870 and 1879, after which it was purchased by the Imperial Hermitage in 1884. This new and updated catalogue of the Sabouroff collection includes a reconstruction of the events accompanying the purchase of this collection based on documents in the Archives of The State Hermitage Museum. In addition, detailed reports of modern methods of analyses are taken into account that have been utilized for a complete reassessment of the Sabouroff collection for its full publication.

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