Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

7 | 2012

Ceramics / Submorphemics

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4406>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.4406

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Laurence Machet, "The Portland Vase and the Wedgwood copies: the story of a scientific and aesthetic challenge", *Miranda* [Online], 7 | 2012, Online since 09 December 2012, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4406> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.4406>

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The Portland Vase and the Wedgwood copies: the story of a scientific and aesthetic challenge

Laurence Machet

- 1 The Portland Vase has been displayed in the British Museum since 1810. Originally known as the Barberini Vase, it owes its current name to the family of the Dukes of Portland, who owned it from the late 18th century to 1945. Its origin, as well as the circumstances of its discovery¹ and the interpretation of its decorations, has proved elusive and since its excavation this difficulty to grasp the historical reality of the vessel, its function and significance, may well account for the fascination it has exerted on scholars and the general public alike. This may also explain why the greatest 18th century British ceramics manufacturer, Josiah Wedgwood, used the vase as the basis for technical experiments intended to determine and then recreate its substance and aspect. This paper intends to show how Wedgwood's copies of the Portland Vase both acted as a relay to the original vase's fame and became near works of art in their own right.
- 2 The Portland Vase is a dark blue glass vase measuring 24.8 centimetres in height and 17.7 centimetres in diameter. It is said to have been discovered in the late 16th century in the tomb of Emperor Alexander Severus near Rome and to have contained ashes but the circumstances of its discovery are unclear and in dispute. The vase is first mentioned in a letter the French scholar and astronomer Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637) sent to his friend Rubens². According to Fabri de Peiresc, who travelled in Italy between 1599 and 1601, the vase was at that time in the collection of Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte. It was then bought by the Barberinis, an influential Italian family which included among its members Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, the future Pope Urban VIII. In the 18th century, the vase was allegedly sold to a Scottish art dealer, James Byres. Sir William Hamilton, who was then British Ambassador to the Bourbon Court of Naples, bought it from Byres in 1778. He brought it back to England and sold it in 1784 to the dowager Duchess of Portland, whom Horace Walpole

described as “a simple woman and intoxicated only by *empty* vases³.” On her death, it passed to her son, William Cavendish-Bentinck, 3rd Duke of Portland.

- 3 The vase is fitted on each side with handles and was possibly once equipped with a lid. Its body is decorated with mythological figures and scenes cut in relief in white glass. It is most likely that its original shape was that of an amphora but its foot was broken at an undetermined period. The flat disk, 12.2 cm in diameter, on which the vase used to stand and which is now displayed next to it, seems to prove this point. It is indeed thought to have been made at a later date and the Phrygian-capped head on the disc is generally supposed to be that of Paris or his father Priam [Figure 1].

Figure 1

- 4 The significance of the two sides of the vase is less clear and has been extensively debated over the centuries, the mystery surrounding the figures being one of the key factors contributing to the reputation of the vase. It has even been suggested that the frieze of the Portland Vase is “a kind of erudite puzzle [and that] a deliberate ambiguity must have been contrived by the artist as part of the image’s appeal⁴.”
- 5 Among the vast array of hypotheses, one of the most commonly accepted ‘Greek mythology’ theories was developed by Professor Bernard Ashmole⁵, followed by Kenneth Painter and David Whitehouse⁶. First, Ashmole claims that, contrary to a common supposition⁷, the scenes on each side of the vase are indeed two separate scenes and not just one⁸:

Instead of stressing the continuity of the composition, which you would expect him (the artist) to do in order to overcome the handicap of the figures being distributed on two sides of the vase, he has done exactly the opposite, and has made the scene on each side self-contained, with the two outer figures in each turned towards the central one, and in a marked manner averting their heads from their neighbour on the other side of the handle. He has created a strong vertical division, consisting of a tree and a column, between the scenes, and has even bent one of the dividing elements, the tree, inwards in order to form a closer frame to the first picture. If the two scenes were intended to be continuous, the faces under the handles form a further and gratuitous interruption.

- 6 This seems indeed to be confirmed by the two handles decorated with Pan heads that seemingly serve to separate the two faces of the vase [Figure 2].

Figure 2

Figure 3

- 7 Examining the first scene on the vase [Figure 3], Ashmole reads the figure on the left as Peleus, seen entering through a gateway, which may symbolize his entrance into the

world of the gods, which is what Peleus did when he married Thetis. This is further emphasized by his walking on tip-toe, which may mark his hesitation at entering this unknown world. In front of him, we can recognise Eros, holding a bow, the symbol of love, who seems to be guiding Peleus, and a torch, the symbol of nuptials in Ancient Greece. The woman who extends her hand to Peleus as a sign of acceptance is thought to be Thetis, a Nereid who was the daughter of Nereus and Doris. Her wedding to Peleus is generally considered as one of the events precipitating the Trojan War, as Eris, the goddess of discord, had not been invited to the wedding. Out of revenge, she threw down a golden apple that was to be awarded only to the fairest goddess. This provides a link with the decoration on the disc at the basis of the vase, which is thought to represent the head of Paris, wearing a Phrygian cap, as it was Paris who awarded the golden apple to Aphrodite at the wedding, thus starting the Trojan War. For Ashmole, the fact that Thetis has her back turned to her lover, Peleus, can be explained by the presence of the figure on the other side, Poseidon. The latter's attitude is one of concern: he had expressed his wish to wed Thetis until he learnt that she was to bear a son who would become more powerful than his father. As a consequence, she was made to marry a mortal.

Figure 4

- 8 On the other side of the vase [Figure 4], we can see a man and a woman seated on rocks or stones, while a young man is sitting near a column, with his head turned backwards. Basing his interpretation on other representations of the hero, Ashmole identifies this figure with Achilles, Peleus and Thetis' son, who, after his death, was carried by his mother to the White Island in the Black Sea. The rocks or stones could stand as metaphors for the island. To his right, Ashmole identifies Helen, who wedded Achilles on the island, and who is holding an extinguished torch upside down, a symbol of death.
- 9 The last figure on the right appears to be a goddess holding a sceptre, possibly Aphrodite. Ashmole states that, just as Peleus walking through the gate in the other scene was marking the beginning of this ceramic narrative, this static, vertical figure

marks its end. This layout provides some sort of continuity between the two scenes, as an evident balance between the scenes on each side can be noticed. This continuity is strengthened by the plant growing at the goddess's feet and whose trunk is hidden behind the column in the first scene. Ashmole thus justifies his interpretation as being satisfactory from the artistic, mythological and symbolical points of view:

From the artistic aspect, because in each the beloved is in the centre, with the lover on the left and an Olympian deity on the right. From the mythological, because in the one scene you have the origin, in the other the destiny, of the greatest of all Greek heroes: in the one, the beginning of the great Trojan story - Peleus married Thetis and begot Achilles; at their wedding-feast Eris threw down the apple of discord, which led to the judgement of Paris and the abduction of Helen: in the other, the end of that story, with the union of the two principal characters. From the religious aspect the two scenes are equally satisfying: under the gaze of Celestial Love, one shows the entry of mortal man into the world immortal, the other the apotheosis of perfect valour and perfect beauty⁹.

10 Other historians have suggested different interpretations of the figures on the Portland Vase, but whether we agree with Ashmole or not, what must be remembered is that the elusive character of the bas reliefs on the vase and the impossibility of identifying their meaning with total certainty have contributed to the fascination it has exerted ever since.

11 Along with the difficulty of identifying its meaning, the vase has also proved impossible to date and the substance it is made of remained a mystery for many years, the dating difficulty being in fact linked to the nature of this substance. Indeed, carbon-dating, usually used for ancient artefacts, is of no use in this instance because the vase is not made of some sort of earth, but is a cameo glass vase. This has spurred controversy as to the date of the vase, with some scientists even stating that it was not a Roman-period vessel, but a 16th century artefact¹⁰, and basing their claims on the Renaissance-style of the figures on the vase. The general theory is, however, that the vase was produced between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD by craftsmen coming from Alexandria, the centre of glass production at the time. The vase was long thought to be a stone-vase, and it is apparently only in the 18th century that its true nature was discovered, some even crediting Josiah Wedgwood with the discovery: "The substance of the vase is a vitreous composition in imitation of sardonyx and has been ably analysed and described by Wedgwood¹¹." Wedgwood himself does not mention this, though, but in a little booklet written in French and dealing with the vase he writes:

[...] il est reconnu aujourd'hui que le verre est la seule matière qu'on y ait employée. Le fond est un verre bleu transparent mais si foncé qu'il paraît toujours noir, à moins qu'on ne le regarde au jour ; [...] les bas-reliefs sont assez transparents pour qu'on distingue le fond bleu du vase au travers des parois minces¹².

12 He also proceeds to describe the technique used, which had baffled experts when the vase was discovered. By Wedgwood's time, i.e. the last quarter of the 18th century, it was understood that the bas-reliefs were also made of a different layer of glass:

Lorsque le corps du vase a été formé, et pendant qu'il était encore rouge, on l'a recouvert de verre blanc à la hauteur que l'on voulait donner aux bas-reliefs, et qu'ensuite on a sculpté les figures dans le verre blanc taillant jusqu'au fond bleu, comme cela se voit dans les vrais camayeux (sic)¹³.

13 Wedgwood was able to study the vessel closely and write such a precise account because the Duke of Portland consented to lend it to him for a period of one year just three days after it came into his possession, in June 1786:

I do hereby acknowledge to have borrowed and received from His Grace the Duke of Portland the vase described in the 4155th lot of the Catalogue of the Portland Museum, and also the Cameo Medallion of the head of Augustus Caesar [...].¹⁴

- 14 As soon as he got the vase, Wedgwood wrote to Hamilton, one of his most influential patrons, to ask for advice:

You will be pleased, I am sure, to hear what a treasure is just now put into my hands. I mean the exquisite Barberini vase with which you enriched this island & which now that we may call it the Portland vase, I hope will never depart from it. His grace the Duke of Portland [...] has generously lent it to me to copy and permitted me to carry it down with me to this place, where I stand in much need of your advice & directions in several particulars...¹⁵.

- 15 Since the beginning of his career in the 1750s, Wedgwood had become the epitome of the 'Enlightened' entrepreneur. His faith in scientific progress, typical of the 18th century, and his close friendship with such renowned scientists as James Watt or Joseph Priestley¹⁶, spurred him to experiment ceaselessly with new materials. The Portland vase provided him with what he first viewed as a perfect opportunity to try and demonstrate his technical skills.

- 16 Copying the vase had indeed been Wedgwood's intention ever since the sculptor John Flaxman Jr., who was to model the bas-relief figures on the vase along with Henry Webber, had mentioned it in a letter:

I wish you may soon come to town to see William Hamilton's Vase, it is the finest production of Art that has been brought to England and seems to be the very apex of perfection to which you are endeavouring to bring your bisque & jasper¹⁷.

- 17 In March 1784, before selling it to the Duchess of Portland, Hamilton had presented the vase to the Society of Antiquaries, increasing its fame and the curiosity of the fashionable elites. The craze for antiquities, further spread by young men returning from their Grand Tour, was at its apex. Illustrations of the vase were present in *L'Antiquité expliquée* by Bernard de Montfaucon and had contributed to disseminating its reputation all over Europe. In 1786, Wedgwood, by then aware of the technical difficulties he would face, eventually and somewhat reluctantly embarked on a long¹⁸ series of experiments to emulate the aspect of the vase:

I proceeded with spirit, & sufficient assurance that I should be able to equal, or excel if permitted, that copy of the vase; but now that I can indulge myself with full and repeated examinations of the original work itself my crest is much fallen & I should scarcely muster sufficient resolution to proceed if I had not, too precipitately, pledged myself to many of my friends to attempt it¹⁹.

- 18 As Wedgwood was not planning to use the cameo glass technique²⁰, he above all feared he would not be able to reproduce the transparency, delicacy and sense of perspective of the vase's bas reliefs: "It is apparent, that the artist has availed himself very ably by the dark ground, in producing the perspective and distance required, by cutting the white away²¹..." The material he intended to use was jasperware. In 1772, as their company was facing a slump in its sales, Thomas Bentley, Wedgwood's friend and partner, had suggested the creation of a new material to rekindle the customers' interest. In 1774, Wedgwood came up with a biscuit, which he named jasperware and which proved an ideal base for the neo-classical designs and pastel shades made popular by James and Robert Adam. It took him another three years to perfect this new material but in 1777 he was able to launch its large-scale production:

I have tried my new mixing of Jasper, & find it very good. Indeed I had not much fear of it, but it is a satisfaction to be certain, & I am now ABSOLUTE in this precious

article & can make it with as much facility, & certainty as black ware. Sell what quantity you please²².

- 19 By 1786, the technique of producing jasper was perfectly mastered. The difficulty, however, lay in its unpolished aspect, hence Wedgwood's concern about his potential failure to make a faithful replica of the vase and its glossy surface.
- 20 The shape of the vase itself turned out to be another difficulty, as it was not as harmonious as could have been expected, and Wedgwood even wondered at some point if he should not try to improve it, asking again for Hamilton's opinion: "Would it be advisable, in these cases, to make any deviation from the original, or to copy as close as we can its defects as well as its beauties²³?" Apparently following Hamilton's advice, he finally decided against changing the shape of the vase and stuck to the original form. The colour of the original vase also proved tremendously difficult to obtain. Indeed, the Portland vase is of a very dark blue hue, nearly black. Wedgwood had developed black jasper, but to obtain a closer colour he needed to mix in some cobalt into the jasper. This was the biggest problem Wedgwood had to solve, along with that of firing. The temperature inside the oven was usually roughly estimated by the kiln-man, but the fragility of jasper and the task of copying this prestigious vase were too complex for such an empirical method. In order to solve these firing problems, Wedgwood used the pyrometer, an instrument that he had conceived to measure the heat inside the kiln and that he had presented to the Royal Society in 1782.²⁴ It consisted of two wooden rulers mounted on a baseboard. The rulers were half an inch apart at the top and one third of an inch apart at the bottom. One ruler was marked with a graduated scale. Specially designed clay cylinders of a specific size were fired and, while cooling, shrank proportionally to the heat they had been subjected to. They were then placed between the rulers, pushed along until they could go no further and the temperature the cylinder had been subjected to was read off the scale, in degrees Wedgwood. Despite using his pyrometer, it was only in September 1789, more than three years after being lent the vase, and after making a number of cracked or blistered copies that Wedgwood finally managed to create a satisfactory version of the Portland vase. The first vases thus produced were called 'First Edition Vases' and Wedgwood, after this long-awaited technical success, set out to transform it into a commercial one, on the advice of his most powerful patrons. Some of them had indeed expressed the wish to buy replicas of the vase even before Wedgwood set out on his task²⁵.
- 21 In October 1789, Wedgwood was able to send the first successful copy of the vase to his friend Erasmus Darwin. Never short of ideas for promoting his wares, Wedgwood presented another copy to Queen Charlotte on May 1, 1790 and then organized a private viewing of the vase at the house of Sir Joseph Banks, then president of the Royal Society²⁶. The copy also received Sir Joshua Reynolds' seal of approval as he wrote a certificate testifying that Wedgwood's work was true to the original: "I can venture to declare it a correct and faithful imitation, both in regard to the general effect, and the most minute details of the parts²⁷." [Figure 5].

Figure 5

- 22 There are differences, though, between the original and the copy. The most notable one lies in the duller aspect of the jasper body of Wedgwood's vase. Besides, for the same reason, Flaxman's bas-reliefs, though perfectly executed, lack the transparency of the glass originals. The copy was however a technical success.
- 23 Financially, experimenting on the vase for three years had proved costly. But rather than waiting for immediate profits from his work, Wedgwood rather saw it as a kind of investment in what we would now call 'Research and Development'. Indeed, beyond the potential, but dubious, immediate benefit of selling the copies, what Wedgwood clearly had in mind was to take advantage of his contemporaries' taste for antiques even though he did not necessarily agree with it, or even understand it:
- I have a very small drawing of a Vase which was dug out of Herculaneum, & I think you told me W. Farrington gave it to you. I do not see any beauty in it but will make something like it if we can manage it without too much trouble²⁸.
- 24 By May 1790, Wedgwood had received twenty subscriptions for his version of the Portland vase. What must be kept in mind, however, is that the sales never covered the expense the copies had caused. Besides, the price tag of the vase, around £ 50, which did not even cover production costs, is likely to have been a powerful deterrent.
- 25 But the technical challenge, enhanced by the prestige of the vase, its mysterious origin and significance, turned Wedgwood's undertaking into an unusual advertising campaign for his other more mundane products. Thus, the favourable reactions to the vase copies encouraged him to exhibit them in the rest of Europe, as many of his patrons, or prospective patrons, lived abroad. As a result, Wedgwood's second son, Josiah II, embarked on a kind of promotional tour which lasted six months, from June till December 1790, presenting the vase to ambassadors or princes in The Hague, Amsterdam and Frankfurt among others. Few subscriptions were registered on the

occasion but the impact on the image of the company was huge, reinforcing the status of Wedgwood as the supplier of ceramics to the nobility, which had been firmly established since he had become Potter to the Queen²⁹ in 1765.

- 26 By copying the Portland vase, and more generally manufacturing artefacts inspired by Ancient Rome or Greece³⁰, Wedgwood also put himself and his company on a par with those he named 'the Connoisseurs', among whom was Sir William Hamilton. Indeed, just like Hamilton had had his collection described and illustrated by Pierre-François Hugues d'Hancarville³¹ in 1766-67 in order to spread the taste for antiques in Britain, Wedgwood was achieving the same aim through his production. At least that was the excuse or pretext he gave for using Roman or Greek models which were highly fashionable, and for making separate copies of the figures on the Portland vase, which would then be applied to other objects:

I would next beg your advice respecting the introduction of the figures in other works and forms, in which they might serve the arts, & diffuse the seeds of good taste, more extensively than by confining them to the vase only³².

- 27 Sceptics would of course argue with good reason that Wedgwood was just trying to make the most of his investment. It is nonetheless true that Wedgwood's products had a huge influence in spreading classical taste, by making it accessible, via copies, to more people than the happy few who could afford to buy the original works. His copy of the Portland vase also contributed to the lasting popularity of the original. The celebration of the vase and its copy in a poem also helped keep the public's interest alive.

- 28 Wedgwood had indeed sent the first perfect copy of the vase to his friend Erasmus Darwin in October 1789, but had already referred to the vase and its possible impact on a poet's imagination in July of that year:

The various explications of the bas-reliefs upon this famous work of Antiquity which I have collected, & think you have a copy of, might furnish even a minor poet with subjects for a few lines; what effects must it have then on a fancy and genius of the first order³³.

- 29 Darwin was at the time in the process of writing a long poem *The Botanic Garden*. Part I of the poem is entitled *The Economy of Vegetation* while Part II, published in fact before part I, is *The Loves of the Plants*. The latter celebrates the natural world while *The Economy of Vegetation*, with its stress on improvement and enlightenment, celebrates scientific progress and technological innovation, concentrating on mining and the use of minerals. It is thus no wonder if Darwin took up Wedgwood's suggestion to include a few lines about his factory, aptly named Etruria, and the Portland Vase in his poem. *The Economy of Vegetation* is written in 1224 couplets, divided into four cantos on Fire, Earth, Water and Air. In canto II (Earth), Darwin wrote a section about Wedgwood and the Portland Vase:

"ETRURIA! next beneath thy magic hands
Glides the quick wheel, the plastic clay expands
Nerved with fine touch, thy fingers (as it turns)
Mark the nice bounds of vases, ewers, and urns;
Round each fair form in lines immortal trace
Uncopied Beauty, and ideal Grace.
"GNOMES! as you now dissect with hammers fine
The granite-rock, the nodul'd flint calcine;
Grind with strong arm, the circling chert betwixt
Your pure Ka-o-lins and Pe-tun-tses mixt;

O'er each red saggars burning cave preside
 The keen-eyed Fire-Nymphs blazing by your side;
 And pleased on WEDGWOOD ray your partial smile
 A new Etruria decks Britannia's isle.—
 Charm'd by your touch, the flint liquescent pours
 Through finer sieves, and falls in whiter showers;
 Charm'd by your touch, the kneaded clay refines
 The biscuit hardens, the enamel shines;
 Each nicer mould a softer feature drinks
 The bold Cameo speaks, the soft Intaglio thinks.
 "To call the pearly drops from Pity's eye
 Or stay Despair's disanimating sigh
 Whether, O Friend of art! the gem you mould
 Rich with new taste, with antient virtue bold;
 Form the poor fetter'd SLAVE on bended knee
 From Britain's sons imploring to be free;
 Or with fair HOPE the brightening scenes improve
 And cheer the dreary wastes at Sydney-cove;
 Or bid Mortality rejoice and mourn
 O'er the fine forms on PORTLAND'S mystic urn.
 "Here by fall'n columns and disjoin'd arcades
 On mouldering stones, beneath deciduous shades
 Sits HUMANKIND in hieroglyphic state
 Serious, and pondering on their changeful state;
 While with inverted torch, and swimming eyes
 Sinks the fair shade of MORTAL LIFE, and dies.
 There the pale GHOST through Death's wide portal bends
 His timid feet, the dusky steep descends;
 With smiles assuasive LOVE DIVINE invites
 Guides on broad wing, with torch uplifted lights;
 IMMORTAL LIFE, her hand extending, courts
 The lingering form, his tottering step supports;
 Leads on to Pluto's realms the dreary way
 And gives him trembling to Elysian day.
 Beneath in sacred robes the PRIESTESS dress'd
 The coif close-hooded, and the fluttering vest
 With pointing finger guides the initiate youth
 Unweaves the many-colour'd veil of Truth
 Drives the profane from Mystery's bolted door
 And Silence guards the Eleusinian lore³⁴.

- 30 We can spot several references to Wedgwood and his products. 'Etruria' (line 291) was indeed the name of his factory, built in 1768-1769. Erasmus Darwin had suggested it, as it was then commonly believed that the vases that were being excavated in Italy were Etruscan. 'The poor fetter'd slave' line 315 refers to the cameo of a slave in chains, manufactured and distributed as of 1787 to promote the end of the slave trade. Finally, 'Portland's mystic urn' is of course the Portland vase and from line 321 to line 340, Darwin describes the figures on the vase and gives his own interpretation. In the first American edition of Darwin's *Botanic Garden*, William Blake engraved four views of the vase, which were published to illustrate a six-page note about the vase (note XXII)³⁵. Even though Wedgwood could not anticipate this free advertisement of his work, as the American edition was published three years after he died, the huge success of Darwin's poem may partially account for the lasting fame and popularity of the vase.

- 31 Wedgwood's finest copies of the Portland vase marked the climax of his career³⁶ and remain even now great technical achievements. They were not, however, works of art but copies, in a fabricated material, of a work of art which was itself imperfect in shape. The original vase nevertheless remains a powerful symbol of Britain's craze for antiques in the 18th century, while its copy symbolizes the Enlightenment faith in scientific knowledge and technical progress that could permit the present to emulate the past and turn its artefacts into commodities.

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NOTES

1. A common belief is that it was discovered in Emperor Alexander Severus' tomb, at Monte del Grano, near Rome around 1582 but there is no definite proof of this.

2. Jaffé David. "Peiresc, Rubens, dal Pozzo and the 'Portland Vase'". *The Burlington Magazine*. Vol. 131, n° 1037 (August 1989): 554-559
3. *Letters of Horace Walpole*. London, 1905, vol. XIII, p. 308.
4. Zanker, Paul. *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. University of Michigan Press, 1990, p. 253
5. The first to voice this theory was Winckelmann. Ashmole, Bernard. "A New Interpretation of the Portland Vase." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*. vol. 87 (1967): 1-17.
6. Painter, Kenneth & Whitehouse, David: *Roman Glass: Two Centuries of Art and Invention*. Society of Antiquaries of London, 1991.
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8. Ashmole, Bernard. op. cit. p.3.
9. Ashmole, Bernard. op. cit. p.17.
10. Rogers, Lucy. "Why can't scientists date the Portland Vase?" *The Guardian*, Thursday 28 August 2003, accessed January 26, 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2003/aug/28/thisweekssciencequestions1>
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13. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
14. "Acknowledgement of receipt of the Portland Vase", Keele University, Ms, E33-24859, 10/06/1786.
15. Letter from Josiah Wedgwood to Sir William Hamilton, Keele University, Mss E26-18976, 24 June 1786.
16. Watt and Priestley were both members of the Lunar Society of Birmingham, an informal learned society that started meeting in the mid 1760s. There is no evidence that Josiah Wedgwood was a member of that society, but he regularly attended its meetings, along with another of his close friends, Erasmus Darwin.
17. Letter from John Flaxman to Josiah Wedgwood, Keele University, Mss 2-30188 5 February 1784.
18. Nearly four years elapsed between his first experiments and the first perfect copy of the vase.
19. Letter from Josiah Wedgwood to Sir William Hamilton, Keele University, Mss E26-18976, 24 June 1786.
20. The first glass copy of the vase was made at the end of the 19th century.
21. Letter from Josiah Wedgwood to Sir William Hamilton, Keele University, Mss E26-18976, 24 June 1786.
22. Letter from Josiah Wedgwood to Thomas Bentley, Keele University, Ms, E25-18790, 03/11/1777.
23. *Ibid.*
24. "An Attempt to make a Thermometer measuring the higher Degrees of Heat from a red Heat up to the strongest that Vessels made of Clay can support".
25. "Several gentlemen have urged me to make copies of the vase by subscription, and have honoured me with their names for that purpose, but I tell them, & with great truth, that I am extremely diffident of my ability to perform the task..." Letter from Josiah Wedgwood to William Hamilton, Keele University, Mss, E26-18976, 24/06/1786.
26. Wedgwood had been a Fellow since January 1783.

27. Sir Joshua Reynolds' certificate, 15 June 1790, quoted by Wedgwood, Josiah. *Description abrégée du vase de Barberini, maintenant vase de Portland, et de la méthode que l'on a suivie pour en former les bas-reliefs ; accompagnée de conjectures sur les sujets qui y sont représentés*. London, 1790, p. 2.
 28. Letter from Josiah Wedgwood to his partner Thomas Bentley, Keele University, Mss, E25-18271, 01/12/1769.
 29. Queen Charlotte: Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz (1744 – 1818), wife of George III.
 30. The Portland vase was an exception: Wedgwood usually did not copy vases which had already been introduced into Britain, but designed his vases by using the engravings of the collections of various 'Connoisseurs' like Hamilton.
 31. W. Hamilton & P. d'Hancarville, *Antiquités étrusques, grecques et romaines*, (4 vols). Naples, 1766-67.
 32. Letter from Josiah Wedgwood to Sir William Hamilton, Keele University, Mss E26-18976, 24 June 1786.
 33. Letter from Josiah Wedgwood to Erasmus Darwin, Keele University, Mss E26-19002, July 1789.
 34. Darwin, Erasmus. *The Botanic Garden*, Part II *The Economy of Vegetation* Canto II, lines 291-340. London, Jones & Company, 1825, 33-34.
 35. Darwin, Erasmus. *The Botanic Garden*. New York: T. & J. Swords, 1798.
 36. He died in 1795.
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ABSTRACTS

This paper intends to study the original Portland Vase, on display in the British Museum since 1810, and the copies made by Josiah Wedgwood at the end of the 18th century. The story of the original vase will be evoked, along with a few theories that try to explain the meaning of its bas-reliefs. Then I shall discuss the different reasons why Wedgwood attempted to make copies of this vase and show why this attempt was a bold technical and commercial manoeuvre.

Cet article se propose d'étudier le vase de Portland, abrité au British Museum depuis 1810, et la copie que le célèbre céramiste Josiah Wedgwood en a faite à la fin du XVIII^{ème} siècle. Après avoir brièvement retracé l'histoire du vase original et évoqué quelques-unes des hypothèses tentant d'expliquer les bas-reliefs qui l'ornent, je souhaiterais montrer comment Josiah Wedgwood s'est saisi de cette œuvre à des fins scientifiques, commerciales et pédagogiques et comment sa copie, célébrée jusque dans un poème, a contribué à propager et entretenir la fascination qu'exerçait l'original.

INDEX

Mots-clés: vase de Portland, copie, néoclassicisme, Wedgwood, interprétation, poème

Keywords: Portland vase, copy, Wedgwood, meaning, neo-classical taste, poem

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