ANTIQUARIANS AT THE GETTY



Traces–Collections–Ruins

Towards a Comparative History of Antiquarianism



Getty Villa ❧ Getty Center
June 3 & 4, 2010

I am at the Getty Center today at a symposium organized by Alain Schnapp. Some very distinguished experts brought together to discuss antiquarians.

Antiquarians?

Those fascinated, often passionate, about the collection, description, classification of the remains of the past. Artifacts and monuments, landscapes even, as evidence connecting us with the past.

Antiquarianism sounds arcane. It is. Not least because it got such a bad press. By the nineteenth century, calling someone an antiquarian was an insult, inferring

they were an amateurish scholar at best, bookish, myopic, neurotically obsessed with dry and dusty relics of no interest to anyone else.

But a major reevaluation is taking place. This symposium is part of a deep rethinking of the history of antiquarian thought. The topic is nothing less than people's attitudes towards the past, and particularly the presence of the past with us here now, and how we might deal with the remains. There'll be a book later, backed by the Getty, a comparative history, comparing and contrasting antiquarians across different cultures.

Broadly we are dealing with people's attachment to things and places, relationships with the life of things. It's about memory, personal and collective, the way things make us who we are, traces and vestiges of times gone past, ruin and decay, entropy and mortality. Sarah Morris identified three key components: relics, reverence, revival. Collecting, organizing, caring for things, restoring and reviving. Major matters of common human concern.

My contribution is called "An antiquarian and his dog: Walter Scott in Pompeii", looking at how all this was worked out in the Scottish borders at the end of the eighteenth century.

Here's how I started:

Pompeii, February 16 1832.

Walter Scott, poet, literary antiquarian, magistrate, collector, best-selling inventor of the historical novel, was visiting the excavations in the company of William Gell, antiquarian, topographer, and representative of the Society of Dilettanti of London. Gell was in pain with his gout. Scott was dying and had to pushed around the ruins in a wheelchair.

Gell’s diary (reported by Lockhart, Scott’s biographer) contains the following entry:

“… I was sometimes enabled to call his attention to such objects as were the most worthy of remark. To these
observations, however, he seemed generally nearly insensible, viewing the whole and not the parts, with the eye, not of an antiquary, but a poet, and exclaiming frequently—” The City of the Dead,” without any other remark.”

Pompeii was, of course, newly excavated: the spectacular, tangible and evocative remains of catastrophe, trauma, and aftermath.

Scott talked more about Gell’s dog – it reminded him of his own back at Abbotsford on the Tweed in Scotland.

Why was it simply the city of the dead to Scott?

Rather than pursue any interest in Roman antiquities, Scott, again according to Lockhart and his own diary, feverishly collected local manuscripts and started writing a novel about bandits!

Why was Scott, whose antiquarian imagination fired up a generation of readers at the beginning of the nineteenth century, not interested in the most spectacular of archaeological ruins?

You can find my answer here –



For me antiquarian thought is distinctively contemporary. We can see this argument made so well by Walter Benjamin, his take on the figure of the collector, the ruin of history in modernity, his great final project, the *Passagenwerk*, to create an (antiquarian) history of Paris, capital of the nineteenth century, composed as an archival commentary on a cultural miscellany.

I came to work on antiquaries because of my fieldwork in the borders, centered on our new excavations of the Roman town of Binchester (VINOVIVM.org). Put to one side the caricatures and, in antiquarianism, you find the most intelligent and creative of approaches to studying a region – addressing questions of how you represent a region, handling sources, remains, texts, memories, echoes, mortality, people's impacts on the land and on history, stories and narratives.

Peter Miller (see his superb study of Peiresc) summed up with a very astute point that the academic marginalization of antiquarian study in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is precisely that, a particular partisan exclusion from the

academy of certain interests, attitudes and practices. Antiquarianism didn’t go away. It wasn’t a pre-modern and inferior precursor to archaeology, geography and cultural studies. Antiquarianism is more alive than ever. Just we don’t call it antiquarianism.

Actually, I think I’m a neo-antiquarian.

