*Fabricating the Antique:**Neoclassicism in Britain, 1760–1800*

Vicky Coltman

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index, \$48.00 cloth.

This study sets out to explain neoclassicism in Britain in the period 1700–1800 as a product of the upperclass English educational system. Boys who went to public schools (Westminster, Eton, and the rest) were thoroughly soaked in a classical education, which produced in them a “Roman” mind set. They then went on the Grand Tour of Italy and found to their joy that many places mentioned by Horace or Virgil could still be visited. Rome was for them both a finishing school and a pilgrimage. Classical culture was theirs to expropriate and take home, in the form of lavish engravings (the precursors of tourist photographs), decorative schemes, and occasionally statues. Since there was only a limited number of genuine antique statues and many of those stayed in Italy, there was a thriving market in copies, made either in Italy or back home from casts. A nobleman could bring together for his house a collection of copies which represented the best statues from several continental collections. On at least one occasion the copies were resized during manufacture to fit pre-existing niches in the hall.

Coltman deals with several aspects: private libraries, how the tourists acquired monuments or thought about them, the influence of Sir William Hamilton’s vase publications on the furnishing of English country houses, the influence of the excavations of Pompeii and Herculaneum (suddenly the tourists could see two real Roman towns, and the excitement of digging things up

is palpable), the cachet of the copy, and a study of one of the most important London collectors, Charles Townley.

This wish to go or be Roman sometimes had a bizarre touch: Emma Hamilton, later mistress of Lord Nelson, entertained guests in Naples with impersonations of ancient goddesses, but also on demand pretended to be a figure in a Pompeian wall painting. Townley talked to his sculptures and called one beautiful female bust his wife.

All of which puts the work of Robert Adam, one of the icons of neoclassicism, into context, and it is the analysis of Adam’s creations of noble libraries which is most satisfying. Syon House in Middlesex is Coltman’s most detailed example. Here the library is the most important accoutrement of an educated man of taste. It lies behind and beyond the dining room (and I would suggest significantly overlooks the garden); to reach it one passes through three large chambers each decked with large statues. The library contains clever, classical jokes. At one end a door to an outside stair is made of boards on which are book spines to look like the real shelves of the other walls of the library. But the titles on these spines are those of lost Roman works. I can tell you that opening those doors is a delightful experience.

The author intends to “rewrite neoclassicism in Britain, not as an ahistorical decorative style but as a style of thought.” We should be impressed. This is a study in the history of art, but it contains much interesting background for those wishing to understand an important period in British cultural and material history.

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