

Gavin Hamilton

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A review of

Brendan Cassidy, *The Life and Letters of Gavin Hamilton (1723-1798): Artist & Art Dealer in eighteenth-century Rome.*

(Harvey Miller: London, 2012). ISBN 978-1-905-37559-2, Hardback, 2 volumes, 855pp., £150.

Gavin Hamilton is best known for his series of six monumental history paintings based on the Iliad. At almost four metres wide, one of these images, *Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus* (1760) is a prominent feature of the Scottish National Gallery display on The Mound in Edinburgh. With an equally colossal image of Robert Wood and James Dawkins ‘discovering’ Palmyra also currently on show and several portraits in the collection, Hamilton the painter is well represented. Brendan Cassidy’s fittingly large volumes, over 800 pages in total, deal with much more than the career of an artist however. The publication deals equally with Hamilton’s extensive work (over 40 excavations) as a classical archaeologist and his far-reaching and influential activity as an art dealer, supplying the burgeoning British appetite for Classical sculpture and Italian painting in the eighteenth century.

Volume one consists of a comprehensive introduction made up of five sections: early life and biographical notes; dealing in old masters; digging and dealing in antiquities; Hamilton the painter and Hamilton’s artistic reputation and influence. This is then followed by the subject’s letters down to 1781. Volume two consists of the letters from 1781-1796, over 300 in total over the two volumes, and a collection of 95 black and white illustrations of Hamilton’s paintings and engravings after his work. These elegantly written, very well informed and extensively footnoted volumes reveal just how central a figure Hamilton was. They form a significant contribution to eighteenth-century studies and offer new insights into the Grand Tour. Although a considerable proportion of Hamilton’s letters, particularly those to his most important patrons, have been published before, notably in Bignamini and Hornsby’s *Digging and Dealing in eighteenth-century Rome* (Yale UP 2010) we are here offered insightful new transcriptions and readings. There are in addition letters published here for the first time and others new to English translation.

Hamilton was heavily influential on the formation of some of the most important collections in eighteenth-century Britain. The large collection of classical marbles formed by Charles Townley (1737-1805) are now in the British Museum, among them the ‘Townley vase’, excavated by Hamilton from a large villa at Monte Cagnolo near Rome. The excavation and restoration of the vase are recorded in letters to Townley from March to October 1774. To William Petty, 2nd Earl of Shelburne and 1st Marquess of Lansdowne (1737-1805) Hamilton sold Leonardo da Vinci’s *Madonna of the Rocks* in 1785. Tracing the provenance of these very important objects is inherently interesting but just as crucially Cassidy’s volumes reveal the practicalities of art trading in Italy in the eighteenth century: the relationship between dealer and patron; the clamour in Britain for classical and renaissance art and the vicissitudes of paintings held by cash-strapped owners.

Hamilton worked hard to trace and acquire works for sale, sometimes working on commission for regular patrons. His efforts to source and acquire a painting of a specific size for Lord Spencer, are document in letters between January 1766 and December 1768. At various points Hamilton reassures Spencer as to the quality of a painting he is about to acquire only for the deal to collapse. Alongside these reassurances that a proposed purchase is ‘one of the finest altarpieces in Bologna’ (letter 20) the mundane practicalities emerge as

Hamilton is sent 'two pieces of thread which I found to be exactly the measure wanted' (letter 24). A painting eventually sent to London, not the altarpiece, is again promoted as 'truly original ... the most beautiful figure I ever saw of that subject' (letter 32) but clearly central to the process has been the need to sell Spencer something that fits. Having acquired and sold on objects, getting them to Britain was often problematic. The process of transport is vividly captured. Hamilton fulminates against needing to pack objects 'in such a manner that they will bid defiance to all the cursed crew of mariners &c &c' and derides sailors as 'barbarians who throw things promiscuously into the hold' (letter 91) and worries about damage in transit.

Through all this Hamilton emerges as a comparatively honest dealer albeit one quite willing to pressurise sellers, bribe officials for export licences and make exaggerated claims for individual works. (see letter 24 for Hamilton's attempts to bribe an Archbishop to obtain an export licence). He does not appear to engage in personally cutting up pictures for sale in pieces, a process he laments (letter 234). He operates through a network of contacts sourcing potential paintings for him, doing almost all his dealing with Venice for example at a distance through Giovanni Maria Sasso. He works hard to pass on works in good condition, often restoring them himself, once vividly describing to Sasso his efforts to remove 'a thick soup of asphalt' from a Titian (letter 302)

His dealings with Townley as he tries to sell him the eponymous vase over a period of months from March 1774 onwards, show the dealer at work. (beginning at letter 78 and continuing sporadically to 90) In letter 81 Townley is told that Hamilton is starting to restore the piece. In letter 84 Hamilton describes it as 'the most elegant thing I ever saw'. By letter 88 as the vase was en route to England Hamilton is defending the price of the object and telling Townley he can reject it if unsatisfied. Individually these letters reveal fascinating details. Taken together they offer broader understanding of the culture and society in which author and recipient operated. Considering them together is not quite as easy as it might be. The internal referencing system employed refers the reader back to the original appearance of an object but does not cross refer to every letter in which a given object appears. Thus when Hamilton tells Townley in letter 90 that the latter is in debt to him for £384 which includes the outstanding balance due on the vase, the notes refer the reader back to letter 78. The evolving tale of the excavation, restoration, sale and transport of the piece is documented in 14 letters between March 1774 and March 1775. The notes always refer the reader to letter 78 so there is no easy way to follow a particular trail. Were one to read only letters to Townley in trying to follow the history of the vase then letter 93, to Lord Shelburne which mentions the object would be missed. Ultimately this is a minor quibble. The letters are full of information and that is made more accessible by Cassidy's erudition. The notes help to link these necessarily fragmentary tales and provide valuable context. This is a required text for eighteenth-century scholars. It's also a good read.