Keeping Alive the History of Restoration: Nineteenth Century Repairs on Greek Ceramics from the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden

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Abstract

Many archaeological ceramics from the collection of the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden have been restored at some time during their lifespan. Since a large part of the museum’s collection was established during the nineteenth century, we have come across many examples of repairs dating from this period. In this paper a number of these old repairs on Greek ceramics will be described briefly. Using these repairs as a reference, I will discuss certain issues that are of importance in our understanding of the past. These restorations can provide important information concerning restoration practices and ethical considerations in earlier times. In how far is it possible to identify specific ‘restoration styles’? Why is it important to keep a record of the techniques and materials that were used for these old repairs, and to what extent should they be kept?

Introduction

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was great interest in ancient cultures, partly due to the many excavations that were undertaken in this period. At this time many Greek vases were found in Etruscan tombs in Italy. These vases were traded from Italy from where they spread around the newly established archaeological museums in Europe and the United States. Artists were hired in to make images of the many monuments and objects found during the excavations. These paintings and prints played an important role in the development of the art movements of the time. An interesting example is the production of ceramics by Wedgwood. At the end of the eighteenth century, six commemorative ‘First Day’ ‘Etrurian vases’ were produced, inspired by red-figured Greek pottery excavated in northern Italy (Etruria) (Wills 2003).

In this period large collections of antiquities started to become accessible to the general public. In the Netherlands, King William I established The National Museum of Antiquities
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(Rijksmuseum van Oudheden) in Leiden in 1818. Caspar Jacob Christiaan Reuvens (1793-1835) was the first director of the museum, which followed in the footsteps of the museums of antiquities that had opened in London, Paris and Berlin. Under Reuvens’ direction the collection was quickly brought together, partly due to the efforts of lieutenant-colonel Jean-Emile Humbert (1771-1839) and colonel Bernard Eugène Rottiers (1771-1857). They acquired antiquities from the Mediterranean region and sold various collections to the museum.

An important gift came from King William I who, in 1839, presented the museum with approximately one hundred Greek vases from the collection of Lucien Bonaparte, the brother of Emperor Napoleon. Lucien Bonaparte owned land in south Etruria where many Greek vases were discovered in Etruscan burial sites (Bastet 1985).

Nineteenth Century Restorers

Many objects from the collection of Greek pottery in the National Museum of Antiquities were restored during the nineteenth century. This also occurred with similar collections in other archaeological museums. In general there is no information about these early restorations. Restoration reports describing the work carried out and the materials used were only systematically produced in museums during the twentieth century. A second, more important reason for the lack of information about these old restorations is that they were usually carried out before the objects arrived in the museum. Greek vases were restored in their place of origin, often Italy, in order to make them commercially attractive. Museums were more likely to buy ‘complete’ objects that provided a good image of the ancient culture than a sack of shards.

Although the information is limited, we know the names of a few important nineteenth century restorers, notably from Italy (Bourgeois and Balcar, forthcoming). One person who was involved with the restoration and reconstruction of Greek pottery was Carlo Ruspi (1786-1863), a student of Canova. He was famous for his realistic drawings to scale of Etruscan wall paintings, such as the famous Francois Tomb at Vulci (320-280 B.C.E.) (Jansma 1998). As well as Ruspi, Francesco Depoletti (Rome, 1779-1854) and Giovanni Capranesi (Italy, 1852-1921) were well known (Sannibale forthcoming). In his time, Francesco Depoletti was a famous painter and dealer of antiquities who had his own collection of Greek pottery. He was well known for his restoration work on these objects (Dräger 2004).

Of interest in the National Museum of Antiquities are a few nineteenth century copies of Greek pottery that were made in Italy, for example an official copy of a Greek vase in a museum in Naples bearing the stamp of the artist (1820-1825, H III ZZZZ 60). These objects were ordered by Reuvens who wanted to add examples of fake Greek pottery to the collection in order to enable the differentiation between fake and original objects (Halbertsma 2007). It is possible that this sort of pottery was painted by the same artists who restored the original pottery.

The information that we do have comes from the old restorations themselves. These interventions tell us a lot about the restoration practices of the nineteenth century, as well as the materials and techniques used in the period. They also provide an idea of the ethical and aesthetical views that were current at the time. The shards of vases were glued together, missing areas were reconstructed and missing decoration was filled in, often using shards from similar objects. Characteristically, often whole sections of vases were reconstructed and over-painted to give as much of a complete object as possible. During the reconstruction of the form and decoration there was scant regard to the original appearance of the object. The restorer-artist
reconstructing an archaeological object made use of the available knowledge of the time, such as the drawings of archaeological monuments previously mentioned. The interpretation of the artists themselves had an important influence on the final result.

The recognised value of the material was underlined by restoring the Greek vases ‘as new’ and ‘to the original state’. The restorers strived to obtain an authentic image of the archaeological object. Ideas about the authenticity of an object are defined by the context and culture of the time. The type of restoration therefore can provide a clear image of the ideas prevalent in a specific era. We see a nineteenth century interpretation of antiquity rather than what we now consider a realistic understanding. One interesting example is the so-called Stadhouders vase (AMM 1) (Figure 1). This vase was extensively restored before it became part of the collection of the Museum of Antiquities. The majority of the original surface was over-painted and the original decoration was reconstructed. From the museum inventory it is clear that these restorations were carried out in the beginning of the nineteenth century by Millin in Paris.

Figure 1. Detail of the nineteenth century over-painting on the original surface of the Stadhouders vase (AMM 1, Photograph ©Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Leiden).

Figure 2. Black figured kylix before restoration. The original surface was almost completely over-painted. (K 1894/9.15, Photograph ©Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Leiden).

Nineteenth Century Restorations in the National Museum of Antiquities: Some Case Studies

A black-figure kylix (K 1894/9.15) (Figure 2) was recently conserved as a result of a loan request for a travelling exhibition. The kylix dates from 490-480 B.C.E. and was found in Naples, Italy. Originally, the object had been made in Athens, Greece. The decoration on the outside of the kylix shows Dionysos accompanied by satyrs. In the tondo of the kylix a chained Negro slave holding a bucket and sponge is depicted. The object was sold to the museum in 1894 by Ludovina Verschoor-Bonfanti, the widow of a Mr. Verschoor, who lived in Naples.

As the surface of the kylix had become matte over the years, the curator asked for the original surface to be revealed. Initially the kylix appeared to be intact and no earlier treatment reports were known. It was supposed that the matte surface of the kylix came from a layer of wax. In
the past, beeswax was regularly used to improve the shine on the surface of Greek pottery. A test was carried out to remove some of the material from the surface using cotton swabs and acetone. This test revealed that it was not a wax layer but a paint layer under which a yellow surface appeared.

The kylix had been almost completely covered with stucco on which several paint layers had been applied to disguise the fragmented state of the object. Due to the archaeological importance of this object, notably the image in the tondo, it was decided to completely remove the nineteenth century restorations. The old repairs were carefully removed using a scalpel, soft brushes and cotton wool swabs dampened with acetone and industrial methylated spirit (IMS) (Figure 3). During the cleaning process, the object was immersed in de-ionised water in order to soften the old adhesive, which appeared to be an animal glue.

During the removal of the paint layer it became clear how far the nineteenth century retouching had followed the original decoration. This was remarkable considering that great areas of the kylix were covered with a layer of yellow stucco. Apparently use had been made of detailed drawings of the object to reconstruct the decoration on top of the stucco layer. Whilst cleaning the surface it became evident that two shards in the rim were not original. They were apparently fills made especially for this object from fired pottery. Sadly the nineteenth century painted surface on these two shards could not be retained. During the cleaning process it had been presumed that the shards were original and the paint was removed.

Another example is a black-figured hydria dating from 560-550 B.C.E., which was found in Vulci, Italy, being originally produced in Athens, Greece (PC 47). The central frieze shows Theseus fighting the Minotaur. The hydria was sold to the museum by Lucien Bonaparte in 1839.

The majority of the joins on the hydria were misaligned. As with the kylix, the retouching covered the original surface, and missing parts of the decoration were reconstructed (Figure 4). The retouching was discoloured and appeared to consist of a shellac-based paint, which had been applied onto a stucco layer. The inside of the vase had been completely covered with a layer of gesso or plaster to support the repairs (Figure 5). Up to this point no chemical analysis has been carried out on this material. Because the material softens in water, it is presumed to be a mixture of calcium carbonate and/or calcium sulfate with animal glue (a type of gesso), rather than pure plaster (calcium sulfate), which does not dissolve easily in water. By softening the adhesive with warm water via the join lines the vase was dismantled. As with other objects from the collection of Lucien Bonaparte, animal glue had been used to repair the vase.

Two objects from the Rottiers collection are also of interest. One is an Attic black-figure plate (RO II 88, Athens 550-500 B.C.E.), and the other a pyxis (RO II 91, Athens 475-450 B.C.E.). Jean Rottiers, the son of colonel Bernard Eugène Rottiers, had bought the objects from the diplomat Giuracich, while his boat was moored in Piraeus, the harbour of Athens. The museum bought the collection from Bernard Rottiers in 1823.

The nineteenth century restorations found on these two objects had aged badly. The retouching again covered the original surface. The over-painting along the break lines could be removed with cotton wool swabs soaked in acetone and IMS. This paint layer was also apparently shellac-based. The fills along the break lines could easily be removed mechanically once softened with a compress dampened with demineralised water. The filling was therefore apparently a gesso-like material. The shards had again been stuck together with animal glue which could be softened in water.
While removing the remains of the glue it became evident that shallow holes had been drilled into the surface of the break edges of both objects (Figure 6). These shallow holes had apparently been made to improve the bonding of the glue at the break edges. In addition, two grooves were found in the stand ring of the pyxis. These were the remains of an antique repair. Apparently, metal rivets had been fixed into the grooves in order to hold the broken pieces in position. The rivets themselves have been lost.

Figure 3. Detail of the kylix shown in Figure 2 during the cleaning process. (Photograph ©Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Leiden).

Figure 4. Detail of black figured hydria before restoration. The old restorations are clearly visible. (PC 47, Photograph ©Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Leiden).

Figure 5. The hydria shown in Figure 4 after dismantling, showing the shards covered with a white layer of gesso. (Photograph ©Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Leiden).

Figure 6. Fragment of black figured pyxis, showing the shallow holes in the break edge. (RO II 91, Photograph ©Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Leiden).
**Nineteenth Century Materials and Techniques**

As a result of these and other recent treatments of objects with nineteenth century restorations it has been possible to learn a lot more about the techniques and materials used at that time. Many techniques are regularly encountered, notably the bonding of shards with animal glue and the use of shellac as a medium for retouching. Also, the technique of applying a layer of gesso on the inside of objects is regularly encountered, especially with objects from the collection of Lucien Bonaparte in the museum in Leiden. The technique of drilling shallow holes in the break edges is also common.

It appears that certain groups of objects from the same origin were restored by the same restorer or in the same restoration workshop. In the case of the kylix from the Verschoor-Bonfanti collection it is highly likely that the restoration workshop was established in Naples, considering that the family lived there. The objects from the Rottiers collection were sold very soon after their excavation in the Athens region. In this case, it is probable that the objects were restored in the Museum of Antiquities in the Netherlands. On the other hand, the objects from the collection of Lucien Bonaparte were in circulation for longer and were almost certainly restored in Italy.

It would be interesting to know if similar restorations are found on objects with the same origin (such as the Bonaparte collection) within other museum collections worldwide. Such information would enable us to develop a clearer picture of the output of specific workshops in Italy and the different techniques that were in fashion at the time. It may even be possible to attach specific names to the different restoration techniques. Cooperation and exchange of information between the different archaeological collections is therefore of great importance. If restorers pay more attention to nineteenth century restorations it will be possible to effectively reconstruct the history of restoration. At the same time it would be possible to gain a greater understanding of the conservation problems encountered regarding these specific collections.

**Damage to Objects as a Result of Old Restoration Materials**

Old restoration materials can endanger an object. For example shellac-based retouching media can leave stains on pottery that are difficult to remove. Such retouching often covers the original surface and can soak into the porous ceramic body. Removing the resulting stains can cause problems, since the solvents used can cause the stains to move even deeper into the ceramic material. A common technique in old restorations is the use of shellac to glue shards together. This results in the staining of the break edges as the shellac discolours over time.

The white layer (probably gesso) that is often pasted on the inside of glued objects to provide extra support can be difficult to remove without damaging the ceramic surface to which it is strongly bonded. This material can usually be softened by soaking in water, making it easier to remove mechanically. Up to now stronger chemical treatments have not been used because of the danger of further damaging the ceramic body such as can occur with acids. Further investigation into the composition of this material could help find a safe chemical treatment (Düring 2005). If this white layer is not removed, the possibility of salt problems remains as a result of the migration of water through the plaster layer.

These kinds of risks mean that it is important to determine what materials and techniques were applied in the nineteenth century, what properties and ageing processes the materials have, and how one should approach re-restoring such objects.
Retain or Remove?

In general, conservator-restorers tend to remove old restorations when re-treating objects. Often old restoration materials have become unstable, endangering the object. An object is therefore re-restored simply due to the fact that it will fall apart if nothing is done. On the other hand, aesthetic factors often play a part in the decision. Old restorations are not always so unstable so as to provide a risk to the object, but they can be visually disturbing. Discoloured retouching often spreads over the original surface. Fillings sometimes have an incorrect shape and cover original material. Glues are often discoloured leaving disturbing dark lines along the break edges.

However, there are other approaches to the issue. In recent decades, ideas regarding restoration ethics have changed. The central aim is no longer to bring an object back to its original, presumably ‘authentic’ state. Missing areas are not automatically filled and retouched. The aim now is to make restorations as far as possible reversible and to work with caution, often only undertaking what is essential for the conservation of an object.

Do restorers neglect the historical context when removing old restorations? Are we trying to control and direct the history of restoration? We judge the restorers of the past by the norms of today and make it clear that we reject the ethical and aesthetical ideas of the past. We work to show our colleagues and the public that we now have other priorities by revealing the original object from under the paint layers.

It is important to realise that we are removing a bit of history when we remove the old restoration. We are dealing with the history of the restoration profession which, hindered by the lack of archival material, can only be read from the objects themselves. Alongside this we are interfering with the history of the object itself. Each intervention, even the most recent, will add a chapter to the cultural biography of an object. This biography – the life story of an object – is written by us. It is precisely the physical changes that an object undergoes – restoration treatments as well as general wear and tear – that can tell us a lot about an object, for example, the value and meaning of an object for the owner at a particular moment in its history or the importance of an object in society (Dooijes and Nieuwenhuyse forthcoming).

Conclusions

During the restoration of the Greek pottery collection of the National Museum of Antiquities I have been personally confronted with the problem of how to deal with nineteenth century restorations. Restorers who work with similar collections have certainly been confronted with the same problems (Koob 1998, Plisterer-Haas 1998, Thornton 1998). My impression is that there is no common ethical code regarding how we should approach and deal with such restorations in museum collections. My own experience is that restorers, including myself, are often too hasty in deciding to remove nineteenth century restorations, without properly considering the consequences. The restorations that we now perform are certainly reversible, but the invasion we make into the history of an object is not.

By researching and documenting old techniques and materials we will be able to add a chapter to the history of the restoration profession. The old over-painting is not necessarily an example of bad restoration, but is rather the result of how Greek pottery was appreciated by nineteenth century society. These are historical remains from the period when many great museums were established. They tell us something about the history of museum acquisition and the changes in how museum objects are presented to the public.
It is important that there is more cooperation between different disciplines in the field. Conservator-restorers, art historians, and archaeologists can work together to gather more information about nineteenth century restoration techniques, restoration workshops and the historical context in which they can be placed. In this way it will be possible to make well founded decisions as to how we should deal with these restorations.

Naturally we have the right to value objects in a different way today and to give them a new meaning by re-restoring them. However, we should be aware of the irreversible effects of our actions. We should be conscious of the danger that all the examples of nineteenth century restorations in museum collections will eventually be ‘restored away’. Should we not be far more careful regarding the removal of this history, considering how little we know about it?

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References


