Strawberry Hill – the First Bourgeois Collection

The groundbreaking aspects of the collection of curiosities accumulated at the villa Strawberry Hill, built in 1748-77, have been suggested by Roy Strong in the past. However, even if Strong recognises the innovative importance of the collection as such, he does not draw an inevitable conclusion: it is the first bourgeois collection of any significance. Strawberry Hill with its collection consisting of some seven thousand objects and garden was open for the public, albeit after booking and purchasing a ticket. The interest and demand for viewings was so overwhelming that its owner, Sir Horace Walpole (1717-97), 4th Earl of Orford, at some point had to withdraw from the villa to a cottage in the flower garden across the road, to have some peace and quiet.

To dwell means to leave traces
Strawberry Hill was built in sections between 1748 and 1777 in Twickenham, then countryside, today affluent suburbia just outside London. Walpole was not alone in his pursuit. The original conceptualisation of the villa was principally executed by three men: Walpole, as mentioned, John Chute, his companion for ten years, and with substantial albeit intermittent contributions from Richard Bentley, all of whom had private quarters in the villa.

The group was known as the Committee of Taste. The complexity of these gentlemen’s relationship and the result of it – Strawberry Hill – have been investigated by George E. Haggerty. It was one “of the eighteenth century’s most intriguing accounts of male friendship”, he writes. These men shared a certain sensibility and quality of intimacy which cannot be underestimated. It was an extraordinary household.

We know they were conscious of the complexity of the historical change of their time, and furthermore concerned with their discursive mobility within contemporary social, political, economical and aesthetical changes, this through a vast surviving correspondence. Thus the villa can equally be seen as an abstraction of a change or a rupture between two eras, and the representation of it, in the sense Michel Foucault establishes in his analysis of the 18th century. It was instigated by a group of men from the upper classes, but the result came to precede or predict bourgeois Modernity.

In The Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) analyses a typical home of a bourgeois – “a private citizen of the middle class” – at the turn of the previous century. It is a home a visitor may investigate in the same manner as a detective investigates a crime scene, Benjamin argues. However, the criminal is not a murder, nor a bandit, nor an Apache Indian, it is the bourgeoisie. “To dwell means to leave traces”, he states.

Following Benjamin’s notion we may read signs combined together, united into a cipher, sometimes interpretable,
sometimes not. A home is a collection of signs, a narration of an owner, a narration of its owner that we may understand, if we know how to read the signs, if we know the alphabet, so to speak.

The villa of Strawberry Hill has been mentioned in the context of Modernity by Mark Girouard, albeit briefly. Girouard’s reflections concern general changes of the use of rooms in a country house, as a result of social changes in society at large. With Strawberry Hill we recognise a change of functions in regard to the use of private and public domains in a dwelling, implemented by a demand for informal socialising in the mid-18th century, he argues. But it does not end there.

The Committee of Taste’s activities consisted of a complex cluster of elements which scholars of the past have neglected, to some extent, and even found second rate, i.e. the dilettante’s world of homebuilding, gossip and letter-writing, activities generally seen as diminutive, each in its own genre.

An early example of disparagement can be found in William Hazlitt’s (1778-1830) review in 1818 of an edition of Walpole’s letters: “everything about him was in little; and the smaller the object, and the less its importance, the higher did his estimation and his praises of it ascend”. Although Hazlitt does not state in which sense we may understand Walpole in comparison with his time, his choice of adjectives nonetheless implicates a dismissive position.

Lisa L. Moore develops this hierarchal attitude further, analysing Walpole’s acquaintance, Mary Delany, nee Granville. Letters, gossip, memoirs, homebuilding, gardening, needlepoint and socialising have been regarded as female domains hence inferior, she states. It seems as if the Committee of Taste consciously, purposely and methodically avoided authenticity, coherency, consistency and continuity, i.e. traditional patriarchal domains.

Thus the project of Strawberry Hill could be regarded as the first bourgeois collection. It was scattered, subjective, non-authentic and non-hierarchical – as opposed to an aristocratic, systematic, authentic and structured collection. Some of the curiosities were first exhibited in a rather modest villa consisting of just three bedchambers, a guest-chamber and a handful of more or less private rooms. Not until after 1758, when both Chute and Bentley had moved out, did Walpole commence a vast extension, section by section, and erected a vista of purpose-built exhibition spaces, conscientiously merging objects and architecture into one inseparable unit, comprising some 7,000 items as earlier already mentioned. Leaving its original size of a charming domestic and small-scale country house, the villa over time became a showcase for an ever-growing collection. As a guide for visitors Walpole published “Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill near Twickenham,
Middlesex, with an inventory of the furniture, pictures, curiosities etc". It is an early example of a catalogue printed for public use, perhaps even the first.

The Tribune
The Tribune, added to the villa in 1760-61, was perhaps the clearest comment to a collection in a classical sense, namely La Tribuna of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. If we compare the Strawberry Hill version of the Tribuna, as seen in an illustration from 1784, with the real one depicted by Johan Zoffany (1733 – 1810), painted 1772-78, albeit slightly improved, we notice that the homogenous, authentic and organised presentation in Florence is contradicted by a diverted and non-authentic collection at Strawberry Hill. Whereas Zoffany’s painting of the Uffizi depicts a powerful and exclusive gentlemen’s club of connoisseurs, led by the collector Right Honourable George, 3rd Earl Cowper (1738-80) seen standing dressed in black to the left, the Strawberry Hill collection describes a narration about its inhabitant.

Comparing Walpole’s concept for a collection further, to the one assembled by his influential contemporary Charles Townley (1737–1805), we realise the rupture Walpole’s project represents, in Foucault’s sense. Townley was a collector of antiquities and marbles, purchased in Italy and Sicily, sometimes with support from various dealers. Townley accumulated a vast collection, which, in 1778, he deposited in a neo-classical purpose-built house in Park Street, West End, London.

The Tribune at Strawberry Hill was in contrast full of curiosities. Some were originals and authentic, other were copies. According to the description of it in the catalogue there was, for example, a box presented by Horace Mann, a long-time friend, a pair of candlesticks presented by Henry Conway, his cousin, a cabinet of his own design, ornamented with statues of Palladio, Inigo Jones and Fiamingo, containing enamels and miniatures, and sexually ambiguous copies of the Apollo of Belvedere, Antinous, a Sleeping Hermaphrodite and Venus of Medici, a cravat carved of lime-tree by Gibbons, a gold ring with a phallus, a gold tooth-pick case, and a hair-lock of King Edward; some seven hundred items altogether.

Today the Townley marble collection forms the core of the Graeco-Roman collection at the British Museum. Walpole’s collection – with the exception of a few curiosities kept at the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Massachusetts, and even fewer in a cabinet at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London – has been lost.

This is an extraordinary divergence of fates. To give some idea of the magnitude of damage caused by the scattering of Walpole’s collection, we may consider that the auction took 32 days, when held in 1842. It was possibly one of the greatest losses in the history of art, perhaps only equalled by the sale of Andy Warhol’s collection of art, curiosities and
antiquities at an auction held at Sotheby’s in New York on April 23 to May 3, 1988.  

A secret language

Early our group of young men developed a subdivision to the spoken and written language, adding yet another meaning to a sentence. It was a coded form of language, readable only for those who were introduced but obscured for everyone else, something which George E. Haggerty has pointed out. Walpole and his friends found it highly amusing to create a secret language. “He enjoys writing in codes and seems to know that Walpole will enjoy reading it”, Haggerty comments on a letter to Walpole from Henry Conway. In an analogous way we may assume that the Committee of Taste actively constructed a visual language within an intimate group and among extended family members, giving another meaning to a piece of art or any form of representation of human activity, for that matter.

An example of an iconographic and, at the same time, semantic cipher within the language of art and artefacts in the Strawberry Hill collection is the history of a Roman Eagle. As often in the case of collectors, Walpole had friends acting as emissaries, reporting back to him as soon as an object that might draw his interest surfaced on the market. In 1745, a year before Walpole first rents and later starts to acquire the bits and pieces of land eventually united into his microcosmic country estate Strawberry Hill, John Chute rapport from Rome about a Roman Eagle, found during excavations in the Boccapadugli Gardens within the premises of the Baths of Caracalla. It would take two years from the first letter until the eagle was liberated from its crate on its arrival to Walpole’s townhouse on Arlington Street in St James.

The reason for Chute’s interest and also Walpole’s, and the lengthy purchasing process, which included a threat from the Holy Chair to prohibit any export, is to be found in the same correspondence. Chute compares the Eagle with the eagle in Benvenuto Cellini’s sculpture Ganymede from 1550, which they both had seen when visiting Florence. He describes the Roman Eagle as its superior.

The young god Ganymede is made love to by Zeus, in the appearance of an eagle. Ganymede was made Zeus’ cup-bearer, and Hebe, the woman who had held the position, was made redundant. To Chute as well as Walpole the allusion was apparent. It is in its true sense, as a lonely eagle the Eagle may be interpreted, a soul without his lover, and it is also within this context the relationship between the comparably wealthy Walpole and Chute, who was ostracised by his family, is described.

As a sign the Roman Eagle represents a double exposure of meanings: it is both possible to regard it as an antiquity and – if we disregard its marble and interpret the Eagle for what kind of eagle it actually is – as a story of love. The Roman Eagle thus turns into a “Roman Eagle”, a contextual piece
overruling and outdoing its origins, set within the context of a relationship between two men. The “Roman Eagle” became the sign of their relationship, and a sign put on display and announced for invited guests who knew how to read the same language.

Furthermore, Walpole even had an illustration made of it in the form of a print, which he distributed to his circle of friends. Later he commissioned a painting in 1756 by Joshua Reynolds (1723-92) depicting himself and the print of the Roman Eagle, and then finally a sequential reproduction of the painting. Thus the context and concept of the Roman Eagle was encapsulated by the meaning of its ambiguous reproductions.

Contra dictionary traces Illustrations, letters, essays and publications containing information about the concept “Strawberry Hill” often eclipse or contradict one another. Peter Guillery and Michael Snodin have pointed out some of these discrepancies in a description of the genesis of Strawberry Hill. Walpole’s written accounts sometimes contradict or avoid mentioning what is possible to notice on illustrations, Guillery and Snodin argue.

The illustrations, the writing and comments contradict each other to an extent that one is tempted to believe it might even have been the Committee of Taste’s intention. For instance, an illustration commissioned and supervised by Walpole, and executed by Johann Müntz, depicting the South Front of Strawberry Hill in approximately 1755, may at a first glance not appear particularly odd or strange. Yet, on closer scrutiny it suddenly becomes filled with details leaving question marks behind, particularly in its peculiar omission of a known existing annex to Strawberry Hill to the west, almost hidden by lush greenery, an older building, part of the first farmhouse which would have ruined the image of a delightful Gothic folly on the river Thames. Thus these details describe another narration, a perfectly visible one, but nonetheless hidden, not unlike clues in a crime novel, details left by the assassin by coincidence or even purposely, with the intention to either mock or thrill. One vision disappears as soon we change focus, an effect not unlike the one we get when trying to catch an image through a camera’s lens.

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3 Ibid., p. 75.
7 Ibid.
15 Ibid, p.55-56
18 Horace Walpole’s Correspondence, Vol. 6, Horace Mann, 13 of July 1745, Yale University Press 1955, p. 65.
19 Ibid.
20 Statue of an Eagle, lwpr 16281, call no, 493582, creator S.Wale Delin, C. Grignion sculpt, etching and engraving 37x26 inch, in A Description of the Villa of Horace Walpole, 1784 (Walpole’s extra-illustrated copy), Strawberry Hill Press.
21 Joshua Reynolds, Horace Walpole, 1756, oil on canvas, NPG
23 Johann Heinrich Müntz, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, south front, c. 1755-9, oil on canvas, 61.9 x 74.3 cm, LWL Y.U.