

Conference Paper

The Role of the Documents and Published Sources in Assessment and Attribution: The Case Study of the Malachite History

Ludmila Budrina

PhD in Art History, Associate Professor, Chair of Art History and Museology, Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

Abstract

The newly developed high-tech methods of attribution and assessment have sometimes been viewed as replacements for more traditional approaches. This article uses three case studies to examine the role of documents and published resources as the important sources of information for the attribution of malachite pieces commissioned to the European artists by Nikolay Demidov. The first case highlights the role of archival documents in the identification of the elements and complete reconstruction of an important table centrepiece. The second example uses the materials published by the media of different countries made accessible by the digitalization process, and the placement of this digital copy in the open databases. With the support from the three articles published in the English, French and Vatican journals, it was possible to identify author, date of creation and the relation to the client for one pair of columns, which are the first example of the architectural use of malachite. The third case shows the role of iconographic sources – original pieces and printed graphics – in the attribution of the pieces from the presumably lost collection of Russian malachite created for the First World's Exhibition in London in 1851. In conclusion, the author discusses the importance of the traditional methods of assessment and attribution based on the documents and printed sources.

Keywords: malachite, stonecutting art, Demidov family, Thomire, Sibilio, private malachite manufacture of Demidov, The World Exhibition in London (1851)

Corresponding Author:

Ludmila Budrina

Ludmila.budrina@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

In the course of 10 years, a research into the collection of malachite objects created by several generations of Demidov family, as well as its development, diffusion and impact on decorative and applied arts of its time, was based on diverse documents: archival documents, works of contemporaries and researchers, iconographic materials, press publications and sales catalogues. The author's accumulated experience in working with sources allows to highlight three convincing examples showing the necessity to combine different evidence that captures the entire history of the work.

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2. Discussion

2.1. Case 1: an ensemble of Nikolay Demidov

The first attribution case reconstructs and restores the story of dissemination of a large ensemble created for Nikolay Demidov. The starting point in this research was a publication about works that had been purchased to the private Russian collection. I.O. Sychyov analysed the iconography of the objects in his article and gives an approximate date as “before 1828”; he also established the author, P.F. Thomire, and reconstructed the provenance of the objects by connecting them with the decorations in villa San Donato [1]. He also identified the interiors of the Tapestry Hall in the villa based on the water colours from the State Hermitage Museum collection. Meanwhile, a typical shape of tripod bowl is mentioned in the descriptions of Demidov property inventory already in 1826 as part of the big centrepiece [2, 3]. Previous publications only translated the quotes from these inventories. A detailed article about Nikolay Demidov’s orders to P.F. Thomire written by Yu. Zek [4] based on the documents from the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA) provides us with highly abbreviated information on the centrepiece, based only on one letter. The suggestion about the connection between tripods and three other identified objects from the centrepiece [5] was proved by the documents kept in Demidov Fund in the State Archive of Sverdlovsk Region (GASO).

While looking through the Nikolay Demidov’s bills systematically, I noticed a folder that had a French title *Notes diverses de peu d'importance relatives aux bijoux* (“Different notes of small importance regarding the decorations”). [6] There, among the bills from jewellers, laundry women and food suppliers, were 19 letters of Louis Carbonel, a son-in-law and partner of P.F. Thomire. They were addressed to Demidov and never studied before. The majority of these documents refer to the execution of a large-scale order for a grand centrepiece made of gilded bronze with malachite. Thanks to the analysis of all these materials, it was possible to confirm a hypothesis that the tripod bowl from private Russian collection, the bowl on the baluster legs from the private European collection and the big footed bowl with four dancers listed in a register of stolen works of art by the Los Angeles police are all parts of one large ensemble. The letter of L. Carbonel provided not only a detailed description of objects with their sizes but also revealed an incredibly complex logistics behind the creation of this centrepiece.

Analysis of auction catalogues helped to pinpoint the moment when the ensembles was divided into parts – in 1888, Christie auction house broke it into separate lots before offering them to the buyers. Most of them were purchased by dealers working

for the American billionaires. Not surprisingly, a pair of these bowls on the baluster legs surfaced during the sale of Ch.-T. Yorker's property.

Based on the discovered documents and catalogue materials, the reconstruction of the ensemble was carried out, the story of separate objects was recovered, and their attribution was revised. Magnificent centrepiece of Nikolay Demidov was created in the workshop of P-F. Thomire (Paris, design and bronze) and F. Sibilio (Rome, mosaics and malachite) in 1822–1824 [7].

2.2. Case 2: a pair of malachite columns from Wallace Collection

The second case showing how useful the variety of resources can be used was a research into the pair of malachite columns currently kept in London's Wallace Collection. The luxurious flute columns are crowned with the unique capitals of Corinthian order and are completely overlaid with malachite mosaics including the leaves on the acanthus and the emblem in the shape of the mining hammer on the capitols. In catalogue from the exhibition that took place in 1994 dedicated to the objects of collection that belonged to Anatoly Demidov from London Museum [8] these columns were attributed as Italian work (Florence) dated around 1850. As a result of collaboration with the collection keepers the date was altered and at present the museum website includes dating "around 1830s".

Meanwhile, the three discovered newspaper publications showed a profound impression that these works of art had on the contemporaries and allowed me to allocate archival documents related to the creation of these columns. Two publications in Paris and London newspapers in 1830s helped to clarify the name of their creator – Francesco Sibilio, a marbler and antique dealer from Rome [9, 10]. However, a special interest had a note from a Roman newspaper dated 1826. Its author not just goes into great detail about the finishing works over the columns with malachite capitals but also names their commissioner Nikolay Demidov and creator F. Sibilio [11].

These newspapers articles facilitated the discovery of documents relating to creation of exactly these columns in the correspondence between F. Sibilio and Nikolay Demidov [12]. Earlier, these documents were wrongly referred to the history of another monumental commission of Russian art patron – a round rotunda-shape church which dome was resting on eight malachite columns with capitals from gilded bronze (1827-1834, State Hermitage). Based on these materials, a new attribution was offered for these columns: "A pair of columns with Corinthian capitals, workshop of Francesco Sibilio, Rome, 1825".

The complete argument in favour of this attribution is provided in the article ready for press.

2.3. Case 3: Russian exhibits of the First World Exhibition

The third case shows the value of iconographic material, which allowed to discover and, in case of a large portion of objects, to return attribution to the ex-exponents from the Russian stand of the First World Exhibition in London in 1851.

V.B. Semyonov was the first one to pay attention to the history and grandeur of malachite collection created by Anatoly Demidov for London. He talks about it in his monography about malachite, and this story goes on for several pages. The documents that he discovered in RGADA helped him to establish the timeline of the factory, while the catalogue of the Russian department shed light on the contents of this collection [13]. Meanwhile, malachite from the Russian department of the World Exhibition became the object of reproduction in a rare in its size iconographic material. Twelve objects were portrayed on the engravings of the Official illustrated exhibition catalogue [14]. At the same time, a whole series of periodicals and exhibition publications published the images of these objects. Artists of the time created water colours and coloured lithographs with Russian malachite: Eu. Lami *The View of the Russian Department* (1852), G.-K. Pidgin *The Russian Department* (1851), J. Baxter in his book *Baxter's Gems of the Great Exhibition* (1854), Nash, Hug and Roberts in the book *Dickinson's Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851* (1854).

The discovered extensive iconographic material, along with archival sources, allowed to establish twelve objects from the exhibition collection that are kept in museums and private collections in Italy, Great Britain, Austria, the USA, Spain, Switzerland and Mexico. Reconstruction of this collection and its separate objects are covered in a series of publications [15–21]. Also, it was possible to enumerate a list of attributional characteristics referring to the style and technological process, which could help identify other works from Demidov Malachite Factory not included in the collection for the 1851 exhibition and not reproduced in the iconography of the Russian stand.

3. Conclusion

These three cases prove that not only archival documents but also newspaper articles, illustration and lines from sales catalogues can provide valuable elements for reconstructing the authorship and dates when the objects were created, its provenance and its place in art history.

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