

From Venice to Europe: Reassessing the Dispersal of Classical Sculpture Through Digital Humanities and Archaeometry

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Abstract This article offers preliminary reflections on the dispersal of classical sculptures between Venice and Europe, suggesting that further research might benefit from the integration of digital humanities and archaeometric approaches. Through three case studies – the Adorant of Berlin, the Grimani Vitellius, and the Laborde Head – it considers the potential of such methodologies for advancing understanding of provenance, circulation, and reception, while also drawing attention to patterns of collecting and cultural exchange.

Keywords Classical sculpture. Artwork Dispersal. Digital humanities. Archaeometry. Art Collecting.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Methodological Considerations. – 3 Three Case Studies in the Dispersal of Antiquities: The Berlin Adorant, the Grimani Vitellius, and the Laborde Head. – 4 Conclusions.

A Marcella De Paoli, *in memoriam*

1 Introduction

The circulation and dispersal of classical sculpture between Venice and the broader European context constitute a field of inquiry that has long attracted scholarly attention, yet still raises fundamental questions regarding methodology, sources, and interpretative frameworks. The complex trajectories of objects – whether through collection, trade, diplomatic exchange, or antiquarian tradition – invite an interdisciplinary approach that combines traditional art-historical analysis with the tools of the digital humanities

and archaeometry, interpreting the collection as a proper archaeological deposit. At stake is not only the reconstruction of provenance and networks of mobility, but also the broader understanding of how material culture was redefined, recontextualised, and instrumentalised across space and time. This essay seeks to contribute to the debate by examining both the methodological challenges involved and a selection of case studies that exemplify the tensions and possibilities inherent in such research.



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2 Methodological Considerations

The dispersal of ancient artworks has, until now, been considered chiefly – if not exclusively – within the context of the collecting of art and antiquities (e.g. Favaretto 2002; Doderò 2019). Yet the phenomenon also warrants investigation through processes which, while centred on objects, are more effectively grasped – and respond more acutely to contemporary ideals – when interpreted as episodes bound up with traumatic events, such as the dissolution of civilisations and empires or the fall of a dynasty. Such events intensified overlapping layers of meaning, thereby producing cultural memory. In my opinion, a collection may thus be approached as a *lieu de mémoire*, to be examined along the methodological lines articulated by Pierre Nora (1984-92), Krzysztof Pomian (1989), and Jan Assmann (1992): namely, through the stratifications that render it, in effect, an archaeological deposit. In the nineteenth century, the dispersal of patrician collections in Venice reached a scale that may justly be described as epochal. Giuseppe Valentinelli (1788-1850), an Italian scholar and librarian, best known for his tenure at the Biblioteca Marciana (De Longis 2020), was among the first to recognise that the works once belonging to the Venetian patriciate should be understood not merely as objects of art but as elements of a cultural heritage. In his view, such works functioned as witnesses to memory, embedded within stratified sites where the essence of a civilisation continued to reside. Although Venice had lost its political independence, its identity persisted through its people and, crucially, through the material traces embodied in its collections. The dispersal of these collections was therefore not only an art-historical phenomenon but also a profound moment in the reconfiguration of cultural memory (Pilutti Namer 2021).

As is well established, the history of the collection of ancient art has long constituted a well-developed field of scholarly inquiry (Alsop 1982). Its prominence within archaeological discourse, however, has gradually waned – not, perhaps, because earlier studies neglected to employ contemporary tools and technologies, but rather owing to their limited engagement with certain emergent and intellectually promising strands of current research. The adoption of these new methodological and technological approaches may, nonetheless, serve to revitalise academic interest in the subject. The first is the domain of digital humanities, encompassing the full range of advanced technological tools available for the quantitative analysis of information (O’Sullivan 2023, see now also Adorni, Bellini 2025). Such tools offer the potential to rethink and systematise

diverse sources – such as inventories, catalogues, and censuses – while simultaneously enabling the geolocation of both these documentary sources and the artworks themselves across their various sites of production, provenance and preservation (Griffin, Klimm 2023). Although widely employed in other branches of archaeology, their application remains limited both in the investigation of Venetian collections and more broadly (see Benardou et al. 2018).

Within the wider field of digital humanities, archaeological network research has emerged as a particularly dynamic and promising discipline. It provides powerful tools and theoretical frameworks for investigating large-scale relational phenomena that have traditionally been difficult to capture through conventional archaeological methods. By foregrounding relationships – whether social, economic, material, or spatial – network approaches enable scholars to move beyond the study of isolated objects or sites and instead to reconstruct the broader systems that shaped past human behaviour. The flexibility of these methods makes them applicable across a wide range of periods and datasets, from prehistoric contexts to modern museum collections, and from trade routes to cultural transmission. Recent milestones in the field, such as *Network Science in Archaeology* (Brughmans, Peeples 2023) and *The Oxford Handbook of Archaeological Network Research* (Brughmans et al. 2024), have consolidated its dual nature as both a methodological toolkit and a theoretical perspective, firmly establishing archaeological network research as a key component of the digital humanities (see now Pilutti Namer, Auconi, Bordi 2025).

The second promising domain concerns the direct study of the material component of objects through archaeometry, that is, the application of scientific and analytical techniques – such as physics, chemistry, and geology – to investigate their composition, provenance, and technologies of production (Wells 2014). Thanks to decades of technological advancement across nearly all classes of materials – from glass to stone – these analyses open entirely new avenues of investigation. Archaeometric methods can make substantial contributions to research on provenance, a topic of paramount importance within the discipline, and allow objects to be reconnected to the natural contexts from which their constituent materials were extracted.

The adoption of a methodology combining digital humanities and archaeometry holds particular promise as a means to overcome longstanding limitations in the study of Venetian collections.

Each piece should be interpreted, as a collected object, through a nuanced understanding of dispersal as applied to cultural heritage, situated within a network of non-linear and multi-directional relationships. At the same time, it should be regarded as an autonomous artefact, whose material expression can be assessed alongside its inherent properties, as revealed through archaeometric analysis. Indeed, traditional attempts to reconstruct the size and arrangement of antiquities within individual collections – especially in Venice, where each artwork was imported, including from distant regions, and collections expanded over long family genealogies before being dispersed in highly variable ways – have rarely provided a meaningful insight into contemporary taste or substantially broadened the cultural horizon of research (Favaretto 2002). To date, foundational data necessary for quantitative analysis remain largely unavailable: estimates of the number of collections and objects recorded in early modern Venice, or of the networks through which artworks arrived or were exported, are still absent. The scarcity of such information not only reflects the inherent difficulty of archival retrieval – a skill archaeologists possess only sporadically – but also shapes the perception of collection history as a largely closed field within archaeology. This may, in part, reflect the fact that the collecting of antiquities occupies an intermediate position between archaeology and art history, and has not always been regarded as a theme fully embedded within the disciplinary concerns of the former. Yet, this methodological approach offers the potential

to illuminate the complex relationship between the unfolding of historical events and the development of museology as a scientific practice, which in turn emerged from the interaction of sites, artworks, and cultural content. Such an investigation is complicated by both scientific and museographic factors: the incomplete archival record, the evolving function of collection sites, and the fact that artworks are now distributed across multiple repositories, often mixing objects from excavations, donations, and previous collections, all subject to changing tastes and administrative policies. By integrating these advanced tools, researchers can begin to reconstruct not only the material and spatial histories of Venetian collections but also the broader networks and cultural dynamics that shaped their dispersal and enduring significance. At the heart of this research, however, is the artwork itself. Applying this methodology offers the potential for significant advances in research, while preserving the complexity of interactions between places and objects over time, reflecting the interplay of agency, taste, and contingency. In particular, it allows for a deeper understanding of the main late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century outcome of these processes of dispersal: the museum. This dual approach enables a more comprehensive appreciation of both the social and material lives of objects, connecting their trajectories across collections with the intrinsic properties of the works themselves, and ultimately situating Venetian artworks within the intertwined histories of human agency, mobility, and material culture.

3 Three Case Studies in the Dispersal of Antiquities: The Berlin Adorant, the Grimani Vitellius, and the Laborde Head

Research into the history of antiquities collecting in Venice and the Serenissima has been profoundly shaped by the work of Irene Favaretto over the course of her career (Favaretto 2022), along with her students, including Marcella De Paoli (2008), and other scholars such as Lanfranco Franzoni (1970), Marilyn Perry (1972; 1975; 1978; 1993), Luigi Beschi (1976), and Patricia Fortini Brown (1996). This scholarship, together with the prolific series of catalogues of the collections and archaeological museums of the Veneto region initiated by Gustavo Traversari in 1968 (Traversari 1968) and now directed by Luigi Sperti, has gradually brought clarity to a field long shrouded

in obscurity.¹ The resulting picture is now both mature and nuanced, although still entangled with the broader history of art – particularly painting – where antiquities are seldom considered as archaeological objects. In this paper, I shall briefly revisit three celebrated case studies of statues that occupy a central place in the history of collecting in Venice, selected not only for their intrinsic significance but also for the international renown and influence they have attained.

The first case concerns the so-called Adorant of Berlin, whose collecting history has been recently revisited by Laura Moretti.² This bronze statue, dated to around 300 BCE, depicts an athlete in

¹ Series *Collezioni e musei archeologici del Veneto* by Giorgio Bretschneider Editore. <https://www.bretschneider.it/catalogo/collana/42>.

² Please check the following link: <https://www.leverhulme.ac.uk/international-fellowships/object-history-and-museum-display-adventurous-life-berlin-adorante>.

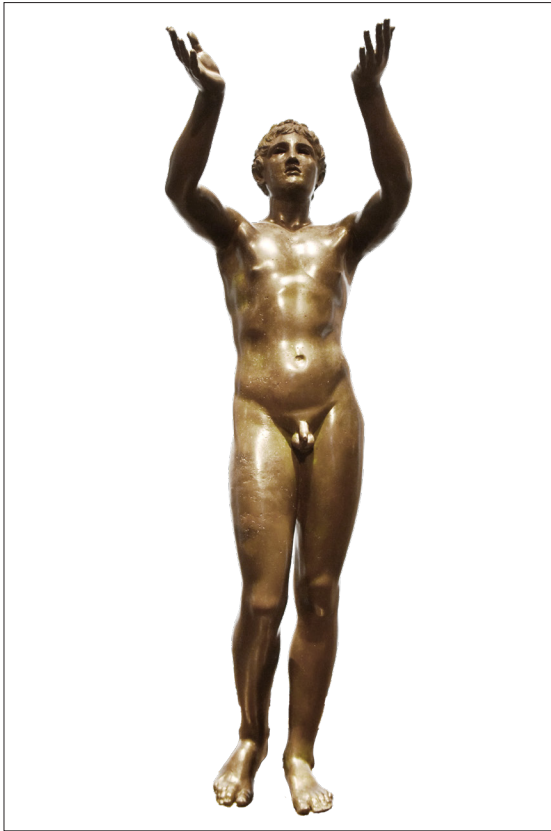


Figure 1 The Adorant of Berlin. Staatliche Museen of Berlin. Wikimedia Commons

the act of offering to the deity the woollen band awarded for victory in a competition [fig. 1]. It was attributed by Ennio Quirino Visconti to Boedas, son of Lysippos, based on a passage from Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* XXXIV, 73). Discovered in Rhodes, the statue arrived in Venice in 1502 or 1503. From there, it was exhibited in multiple locations, beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century, when it was transferred to Verona into the Bevilacqua collection, before ultimately reaching its present home in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin (Zimmer, Hackländer 1997; Gerlach 2002, Moretti 2020). Giuseppe Valentinelli wrote on this piece in the proceedings of the Istituto Veneto, mistakenly identifying it as part of Giovanni Grimani's bequest (Valentinelli 1867-68); in fact, it belonged to the Tesoro Marciano, as clarified by Roberto Gallo in 1952. Credit is due to Bruna Forlati Tamaro, who in 1956 commissioned a technical examination of the piece by B. Bearzi, demonstrating that the replica of the work preserved in Venice, now held at the National Archaeological Museum, is a Renaissance

bronze (Forlati Tamaro 1956). Franzoni reasonably proposed that it was produced around the same time as Mario Bevilacqua's acquisition of the statue, circa 1576, the year in which archival documentation records its transfer from the Tesoro to the Statuario (Franzoni 1964, 57).

The second case concerns the so-called Grimani Vitellius, a portrait of an unidentified individual of high social standing, closely associated with Emperor Hadrian, carved from a single block of marble and dated to between 130 and 140 CE.³ It was perhaps discovered during the excavation of the Grimani palace foundations near the Quirinal in Rome, or in any case during some form of deliberate digging, as indicated by traces of blows inflicted with a rounded-pointed tool, possibly a pickaxe. Upon the death of Cardinal Grimani in 1523, the statue entered the Republic's bequest and was subsequently displayed in the *Statuario* of the Doge's Palace. It has been suggested that this piece represents the most celebrated ancient work throughout the Renaissance, and the catalogue of replicas compiled by Klaus Fittschen in 2006 – although, by his own admission, not exhaustive, and listing over one hundred examples [fig. 2] (Fittschen 2006, 186-234) – appears to support the hypothesis that this was at least the ancient portrait that enjoyed the greatest fame in Italy and Europe during the Renaissance (Schröder 2017). It is worth noting that, despite an extensive bibliography and a restoration undertaken in 2002 (Bertelli 2002), no archaeometric analysis has yet been carried out; the material is still generically identified as fine-grained marble, possibly of Greek origin.⁴ Such an analysis would allow for the confirmation of the specific lithotype of marble from which the statue is made, thereby potentially contributing to the resolution of questions regarding its provenance.

I have selected these two cases not only for their particular importance, but also to illustrate the conceptual challenges inherent in defining dispersal with regard to ancient artworks that once formed part of a collection. In both instances, the artworks – by virtue of their fame – escape the stratification that renders a collection a veritable archaeological deposit. Neither the Adorant nor the Grimani Vitellius retains in itself the fact of having been chosen by a collector; instead, they become active producers of memory, a memory that ultimately transcends them (see Haskell, Penny 2025), as evidenced by the slow and discontinuous progress of scholarly research on their constitutive elements.

³ Refertotheimageatthefollowinglink:[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vitellio_grimani_\(c.d._%27vitellio%27\),_100-150_dc_ca._02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vitellio_grimani_(c.d._%27vitellio%27),_100-150_dc_ca._02.jpg).

⁴ Please check the following link: <https://restituzioni.com/opere/busto-del-cosiddetto-vitellio/>.



Figure 2
Lorenzo Lotto,
*Portrait of Andrea
Odoni*, Hampton
Court. Wikimedia
Commons

At the same time, the phenomenon of dispersal continues to act upon these objects: the Venetian personalities involved, the historical moment in which the events occurred – the first two decades of the sixteenth century – and the original contexts from which the works derived, all remain in the background, overshadowed by the processes of meaning-making in which the sculptures, each in its own way, were central. In this respect, it is of limited relevance to establish precisely when and where the Adorant was displayed, or when and where the Grimani Vitellius was copied: both are relics, objects of veneration, bodies to be contested, no longer fully contained within their original object histories or the historical and social contexts in which they were rediscovered after many centuries.

We now turn to the final case study, the so-called Laborde Head, a work that left Venice in the nineteenth century. The piece, a female portrait from ancient Greece, was historically integrated with restorations and was sold in Venice by Giovanni Davide Weber to the Comte de Laborde, who subsequently donated it to the Musée du Louvre, where it remains today [fig. 3]. According to available sources, the head was recovered in

Athens amid the ruins caused by the cannon fire directed at the Parthenon by Francesco Morosini in 1687, and brought to Venice by Morosini's secretary, Felice Gallo. The head remained in Gallo's possession, integrated with restorations, until its sale (Favaretto 2021). In 2007, the Louvre removed these additions, restoring the natural expressivity of the face, which can now be securely dated to the fifth century BCE (Pasquier 2007). In this case, as with the two previously discussed, no archaeometric analysis has been conducted. This absence is particularly striking, not only because the piece originates from the Parthenon's decorative programme, but also because, since 1995, Luigi Beschi has hypothesised that the Laborde Head and a torso preserved in the British Museum may correspond, and that their combination could represent the goddess Iris (Beschi 1995) [fig. 4]. Isotopic and material analyses could definitively confirm or refute this hypothesis, and it is my hope that the methodological considerations presented here will facilitate such a resolution in future research.

The Laborde Head presents an especially notable case in the study of dispersal. From our current perspective, it is evident that, in the



Figure 3
Laborde Head. Louvre Museum. Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 4
The so-called Iris. British Museum. Wikimedia Commons

nineteenth century, this piece ought to have been regarded as a heritage object to be preserved within Venice rather than dispersed abroad. Today, the loss is especially regrettable, as the sculpture, being part of the Parthenon ensemble, represents not only a highly valuable artefact but also an important emblem of Venice's own history, including the legacy of Morosini's bombardment. This case, like other Parthenon sculptures removed

following Morosini's campaign – as documented by Antonella Sacconi (1991) and Irene Favaretto (2021) – illustrates the trajectory of objects that leave their original context permanently, in contrast to some public *emblemata*, such as the lions now at the Arsenale, which have remained *in situ* yet have themselves become subject to evolving processes of meaning-making that transcend their original status as artefacts.

4 Conclusions

The three cases studied illustrated in this paper further underscore the potential of combining Digital Humanities and archaeometric approaches in the study of dispersed collections. Indeed, applying Digital Humanities tools, which are capable of integrating archival, catalogued, and geolocated data, would allow us to reconstruct the trajectories of these objects across time and space, revealing patterns of circulation, display, and replication that remain otherwise hidden. Simultaneously, archaeometric

investigation provides precise insights into material composition, provenance, and workshop practices, thereby enriching our understanding of the tangible histories of these works. Beyond potentially clarifying the origins of individual objects, such analyses might also offer insights into collecting practices, suggest possible patterns in the acquisition of artefacts, indicate preferred sources, and contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of the art market. In the case of the Adorant of Berlin, archaeometric

analysis was crucial in demonstrating that the Venetian replica is a Renaissance bronze, likely produced contemporaneously with its acquisition by Mario Bevilacqua around 1576. Together, these approaches allow us to reconcile the social and cultural life of artworks with their material realities, capturing both the processes of memory production and the enduring agency of the objects themselves. In this way, the study of dispersal transcends a purely historiographical exercise, providing a comprehensive framework that integrates the histories of collections, the biographies of objects, and the interplay of natural and human factors that have shaped their trajectories.

The application of this innovative methodology also allows us to confront the conceptual challenges inherent in using the term 'dispersal'. Employing it in relation to an idealised whole is, therefore, to adopt an anachronistic perspective: that of the museum and the nation-state as the inevitable outcome of processes shaped by multiple variables (Ostow 2008; see also Meyer, Savoy 2014). In doing so, one risks overlooking both the reconstruction of social phenomena and the history of taste, and – paradoxically – the study of the artworks themselves as material culture, thereby neglecting their truly archaeological dimension. There can be no doubt that prevailing cultural perspectives place recovered, or rescued heritage at the centre of policies concerned with

the identities of people and places (see e.g. Borák 2008; Crémière 2024). While an anthropological reading of this phenomenon lies beyond my expertise, it is clear that it is primarily a European, if not broadly Western, construct which emerged in the nineteenth century and persisting to this day. While in some cases dispersal is a direct consequence of war, this was not the case in Habsburg Venice. Here, there had been no war that destroyed the city, yet its republican identity was eroding in a manner not entirely dissimilar to the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire at the end of the World War I. Venice, no longer the capital of the Serenissima turned into a city, and later morphed into a myth and, ultimately, an icon; yet it lost its intimate relationship with the sea, the very element that had defined its essence and rendered it uniquely receptive to the *disiecta membra* left by the immense wave of artistic dispersals which followed the collapse of the Eastern and Western Roman Empires. Today, digital humanities and archaeometric investigation offer the potential to reconstruct that relationship, not only restoring the allure of these works but also highlighting the pivotal role Venice played in European culture as a repository of artefacts from the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, the Italian peninsula (particularly Rome, Ravenna, and Aquileia), and broader Eurasia – a true cradle of the European Renaissance in the arts.

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