

Twentieth-century private collecting

Dr Philip Nelson's acquisition of sculptures from the Kinnaird collection at Rossie Priory

Georgina Muskett

Dr Philip Nelson, who died in 1953, was an antiquary and collector who lived in Liverpool. One of the highlights of the collections of classical sculpture in the World Museum, part of National Museums Liverpool, is a group of statuettes and busts acquired by Nelson from the 12th Lord Kinnaird and formerly housed in Rossie Priory, near Perth in Scotland. Although Nelson bought only two sculptures from the first auction of sculptures from the Rossie Priory collection, held at Sotheby's in London in December 1948, it is apparent that he acquired several others, either directly from Lord Kinnaird or through dealers. Details of this process can be found in the archives of the World Museum and the Walker Art Gallery, also part of National Museums Liverpool, including hitherto unpublished letters, notebooks and invoices, reproduced here in an online appendix. The correspondence provides an insight into the formation of a private collection of ancient sculpture in the first half of the twentieth century, a period often overlooked in collecting scholarship.

THE Antiquities collections of the World Museum in Liverpool, part of National Museums Liverpool, includes a group of over thirty ancient sculptures formerly owned by Dr Philip Nelson (1872–1953), a prominent antiquary and collector who lived in the city. The museum archive, which includes letters, notebooks and invoices relating to Nelson's collection of classical and medieval antiquities, gives a unique insight into the formation of a private collection in the first half of the twentieth century.¹

Nelson began collecting antiquities in 1897, financed by a bequest from his father, and he continued adding to his collection throughout his life. However, these collecting activities increased from 1907, when he ceased practising as a medical doctor as a result of illness and injury.²

Nelson's collecting interests were wide and varied. In addition to his collection of classical antiquities, including the sculptures that form the basis of this article, Nelson had a marked interest in coins, being a lecturer in numismatics at the then Institute of Archaeology (now Department of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology) at the University of Liverpool from

1904 to 1906, as well as honorary curator of numismatics at Liverpool Museum.³ It is apparent, however, that Nelson's main interest was medieval antiquities. As early as 1913, Methuen & Co. published Nelson's book *Ancient Painted Glass in England*, a topic that was the subject of his PhD dissertation, completed in 1930 at the University of Liverpool.⁴

Letters in the archive of correspondence held in the Antiquities Department at the World Museum indicate that Nelson sought the professional opinion of distinguished scholars in the field of classical sculpture, including Eugénie Strong, before committing to buy items for his collection. Two letters from Strong, written in 1925 and 1932, are preserved at the World Museum; unfortunately, Nelson's letters to Strong are not preserved in either draft or 'fair copy' form, but their contents can be surmised from her replies. Both Strong's letters are addressed from her flat at 35 Via Balbo in Rome, which she purchased in 1925 after she left the position of assistant director at the British School in Rome.⁵ Neither letter, however, involves sculptures from Rossie Priory.⁶

Nelson's home for much of his life was at Beechwood, Calderstones, Liverpool 18, where he died on 17 February 1953. J. H. Iliffe, director of Liverpool Public Museums, received a letter dated 17 March 1953 from Philip Corder, secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of London, advising him of Nelson's death; Iliffe's reply of 19 March 1953 notes that Nelson was 'most generous in loaning items to the museums for exhibition'. He also noted that Nelson's widow was 'in touch with Sotheby's on the question of valuation'. Iliffe also observed that Nelson was for many years a member of the museum's committee.⁷

Liverpool Museum, as it was then known, conducted negotiations to purchase parts of Nelson's collection with his widow, Annie Elizabeth Nelson, née Court, known as Lily. Funding for the purchase was available from the government's War Damage Fund, for which Liverpool Museum qualified as a result of air-raid damage it suffered in 1941. The records indicate that the sum of £1,380 was paid to Mrs Nelson by the museum;⁸ the acquisition also included the archive associated with the collection.⁹ Of particular relevance is Mrs Nelson's notebook, numbered 17, which lists the sculptures collected by her husband,¹⁰ and the archive of correspondence kept by Nelson; unfortunately, there is no known photograph of him.¹¹

Some of the letters in the archive in the Antiquities Department at the World Museum shed specific light on Nelson's collecting methods, particularly correspondence from October to November 1949 between Miss Elaine Tankard, keeper of archaeology and keeper in charge at Liverpool Museum, and D.E.L. Haynes from the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum. Haynes had contacted Miss Tankard in the hope of discovering the whereabouts of two bronze statuettes, which had at one time been in Nelson's collection,¹² and were the subject of an article he published in the *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*.¹³ Miss Tankard advised Haynes that she did not 'know the four statuettes' in question, concluding that they had been re-sold.¹⁴ Perhaps the most telling sentence is 'The difficulty of tracing his dealings is complicated by the fact that he sometimes concealed his identity under other names.'¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is apparent that major museums worldwide include in their collections objects once owned by Nelson, particularly items from the medieval period.¹⁶ The majority were

acquired from Nelson's estate following his death, but it is apparent that others – for example, a medieval carved ivory plaque – are known to have been disposed of by Nelson during his lifetime.¹⁷

The present article focuses on Nelson's acquisition of eleven sculptures¹⁸ from the collection of Kenneth Fitzgerald Kinnaird, 12th Lord Kinnaird, 3rd Baron Kinnaird, of Rossie Priory, near Perth, Scotland, the Kinnaird family seat.¹⁹ This is revealed through Nelson's unpublished correspondence with Kinnaird from January to October 1949.²⁰ The correspondence sheds light not only on Nelson's methods of collecting, but also on the manner in which post-auction disposal of unsold items was conducted.²¹ All eleven of the sculptures discussed in this article, and listed in online [Appendix 1](#), are now in the collections of the World Museum.

Information regarding arrangements for the movement of sculpture is also detailed in the correspondence. The company engaged by Nelson to pack and transport sculpture between Rossie Priory and his home in Liverpool was Pickfords, a specialist road-transport company which had been nationalized in 1945 and in the late 1940s operated a fleet of over 5,000 vehicles.²² It is pertinent to bear in mind that the journey between Rossie Priory and Nelson's home in south Liverpool is not inconsiderable, being a little over 450 miles, without the benefit of the present-day motorway network. Although Nelson offered to arrange packing, handling and transport with Pickfords,²³ costs are not known, as no correspondence between Nelson and Pickfords is preserved in the Antiquities archive.

The correspondence relating to Nelson's acquisition of sculptures from Rossie Priory falls into two main categories; letters from Kinnaird and drafts of letters sent by Nelson to Kinnaird, possibly retained as a record of his purchases. A feature of the draft letters is Nelson's use of abbreviations, such as 'M.L.' for 'My Lord'. 'S' for 'Sotheby's', 'Y.S. for 'Yours Sincerely' and 'R.P.' for 'Rossie Priory' ([Fig. 1](#)),²⁴ with only occasional gaps in the text where Nelson needed to check and insert reference numbers.²⁵ Nelson invariably wrote the draft letters on the reverse of correspondence he had received, including letters from companies which relate to his profession as a medical doctor,²⁶ as well as correspondence that sheds light on his personal life. Examples include a draft written on the back of a letter from his tailor²⁷ and another on the back of a notice of a meeting at the Society of

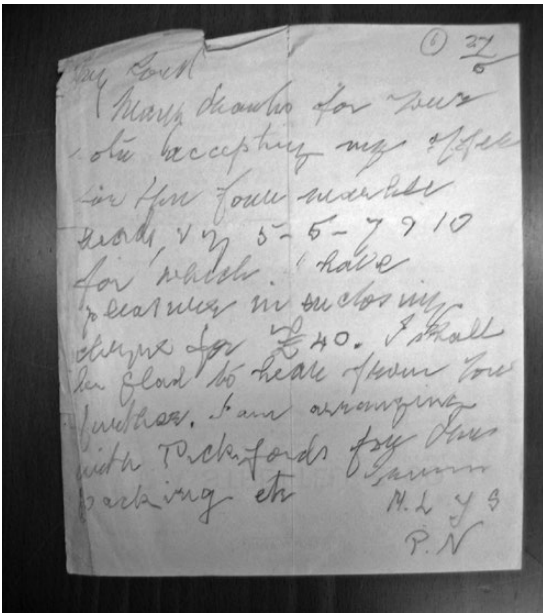


Fig. 1. Draft letter from Nelson to Kinnaird, 27 June 1949. Antiquities Archive, NML [WM]. Image courtesy National Museums Liverpool (World Museum).

Antiquaries of London at Burlington House.²⁸ All but one of Nelson's draft letters to Kinnaird preserved in the Antiquities Department archive are dated, but as discussed further below, the contents of the one that carries no date suggest that it should have been numbered a little earlier in the sequence than it is.

It should be noted that Kinnaird's replies occasionally suggest that the archive of draft letters is not complete; either the drafts were not kept by Nelson or his wife, or the letters were written as 'fair copies' without the need for a draft. This is apparent in one reference by Kinnaird to Nelson's letter of 2 August 1949 and 'all the information';²⁹ no draft letter of this date survives in the archive. It is perhaps possible that the 'information' referred to included details of the sculptures formerly at Rossie Priory and acquired by Nelson, provided in response to Kinnaird's request in the postscript to his letter of 18 June 1949: 'It would interest me to know what you have from Rossie as it is nice to know they have a home.'³⁰ Likewise, the existence of another letter from Nelson, referred to by Kinnaird, that is not found in the archive of drafts is implicit in Kinnaird's reference to their 'mutual friend . . . Elsie Green',³¹ who is not mentioned by Nelson in any known previous correspondence.

Nelson's purchases of sculpture from Rossie Priory

It is likely that the collection of ancient sculpture at Rossie Priory was originally acquired in Rome between 1820 and 1825 by Charles, 8th Lord Kinnaird, and was displayed at Rossie Priory from 1826.³² Although the sculptures were included in Adolf Michaelis's publication listing collections of classical sculpture in Britain,³³ Michaelis never visited the priory, and the numbering of the classical sculpture in his book follows that of a publication of 1877 by George William Fox, 9th Lord Kinnaird.³⁴

A sale of part of the Rossie Priory collection of sculpture was held at Sotheby's in London on 21 December 1948,³⁵ and a further sale took place at the priory between 28 and 30 June 1949.³⁶ The sale of the sculptures was plausibly a direct result of the partial demolition of Rossie Priory by the 12th Lord Kinnaird, who removed part of the south front of the property,³⁷ an event referred to in his letter to Nelson dated 26 July 1949, in which he wrote: 'We are pulling down part of this house and moving pictures and statues into reduced rooms.'³⁸

Nelson's own records indicate that he purchased only two lots of marble sculptures direct from the sale at Sotheby's in 1948. The first was lot 203, described in the auction catalogue as 'A marble figure of Narcissus . . . the restorations are said to be by Canova',³⁹ and, at 3 feet 6 inches tall, less than life-size (Fig. 2). Nelson's annotated catalogue indicates that the sale price was £30. The second was lot 210, consisting of two sculptures,⁴⁰ for which he paid a total of £6. The first item in the lot was 'A marble bust of a goddess' which had been described by Michaelis, following Kinnaird, as possibly a Muse.⁴¹ The other was a 'double-faced bust of a bearded-man and a girl'.⁴²

The first correspondence between Nelson and the 12th Lord Kinnaird was apparently initiated by Nelson following the sale at Sotheby's on 21 December 1948. Nelson wrote to Kinnaird on 16 January 1949,⁴³ explaining that he had bought 'several bronzes and marbles' from the sale at Sotheby's.⁴⁴ Nelson asked Kinnaird whether it would be possible either to purchase a copy of the 'Cat. Of Art Objects' [*sic*] or to borrow the publication – presumably the 9th Lord Kinnaird's *Notes and Reminiscences* of 1877⁴⁵ – indicating that he was eager to acquire further information regarding the

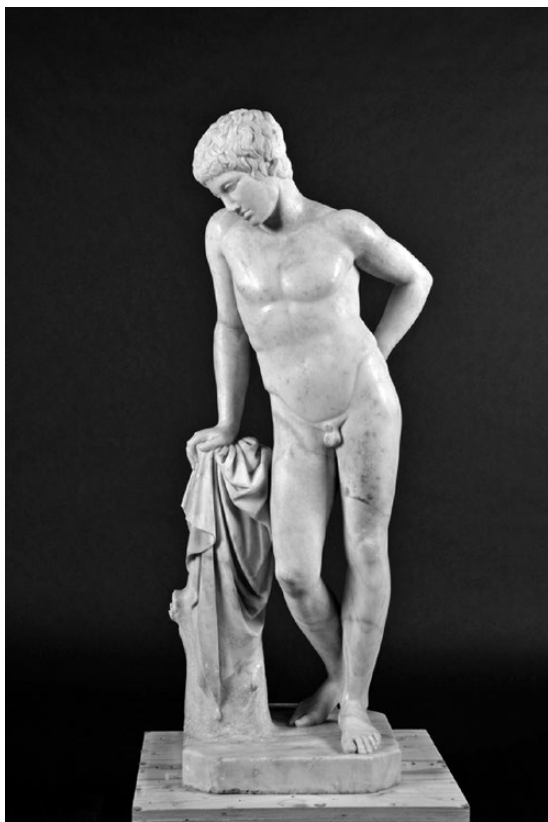


Fig. 2. Statue of young male athlete, conventionally known as Narkissos, Roman Imperial, marble. NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.11. Image courtesy National Museums Liverpool (World Museum).

provenance of the sculptures he had purchased at the sale, even though they had been included in Michaelis's publication. The Antiquities archive includes no direct reply to this enquiry, although it is clear from the next letter from Kinnaird, dated 17 June 1949,⁴⁶ that the two men were by now on good terms. Here Kinnaird advised Nelson that a further sale of sculpture – in this case, marble busts – would be taking place at Rossie Priory from 28 to 30 June; he enclosed both a copy of the sale catalogue and photographs of several sculptures, offering to reserve any busts that Nelson would wish to purchase. The numbering of the sculptures follows the 1877 catalogue, as used by Michaelis.⁴⁷

Nelson replied promptly to Kinnaird on 20 June 1949,⁴⁸ asking to purchase seven busts in advance of the sale; the next seven letters preserved in the archive⁴⁹ concern the eventual acquisition of three of

them, described by Michaelis as depicting 'the young Dionysus' (now referred to as a head of Bacchus) (Fig. 3), Aphrodite, and a female wearing a cap, possibly Persephone.⁵⁰ The other four busts represented a young man, a young boy (possibly Diadumenianus, son of Emperor Macrinus), Marcus Aurelius 'when young' and Alexander Severus.⁵¹ It is apparent that Nelson had not conclusively decided to purchase all seven busts, since he requested prices for them, both individually and as a group. It is also noticeable that, as Kinnaird had not enclosed a photograph of the bust of Aphrodite, Nelson was keen to check its condition, asking 'Is the right hand side of the head new?'⁵² Indeed, Nelson did not wait for Kinnaird's reply, as later on the same day he wrote: 'Further to my letter of this morning',⁵³ advising Kinnaird that he had decided to buy only three busts, those of Dionysos, Aphrodite (despite his reservations regarding its condition) and the female wearing a cap.⁵⁴ Nelson also enquired about a male head made from a type of distinctive red-coloured marble known as *rosso antico*,



Fig. 3. Head of Bacchus, Roman Imperial, marble. NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.16. Image courtesy National Museums Liverpool (World Museum).



Fig. 4. Lower part of small terminal bust of the bearded Dionysos, Roman Imperial, *rosso antico* marble. NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.10. Image courtesy National Museums Liverpool (World Museum).

which is now identified as the lower part of a small terminal bust of the bearded Dionysos (Fig. 4).⁵⁵

One of the letters includes evidence of Kinnaird's involvement with his local community. In his reply of 22 June 1949, he informs Nelson that he is 'in the middle of Highland Show and Perth Pageant'.⁵⁶ In 1949, Kinnaird, in his capacity as Lord Lieutenant of the County of Perth, was patron of the Perth Historical Pageant, which took place from 23 to 25 June 1949; he conducted the opening ceremony⁵⁷ on the day after he wrote his letter to Nelson. In that same letter,⁵⁸ Kinnaird suggests that Nelson make him an offer for the three busts, adding that the right-hand side of the bust of Aphrodite is 'not new', so presumably original. Kinnaird further suggests that he is keen to dispose of all three busts, stating: 'It would be nice to keep them together.' Kinnaird did not wish to commit to a price for the *rosso antico* head, saying he would 'write again' about it.

Nelson's eagerness to augment his sculpture collection by taking advantage of negotiations direct with Lord Kinnaird in advance of the sale at Rossie Priory is evident from his reply sent on 23 June 1949,⁵⁹ offering to purchase the four pieces of sculpture direct from Lord Kinnaird, paying £10 for each

item, which, as he observed, was considerably more than the prices realized at the Sotheby's sale.

Kinnaird replied to Nelson's letter two days later, on 25 June 1949,⁶⁰ though he appears to ignore Nelson's query regarding the possibility of his having any 'antique cameos or bronzes' available to purchase. Although not specifically requested by Nelson, Kinnaird includes the dimensions of all four of the sculptures on the reverse of his letter.

An interesting example of Nelson's use of old correspondence for his draft letters is found on his reply of 27 June 1949,⁶¹ which is written on the reverse of a letter from T. A. Strettell of 32 North John Street, Liverpool 2, tailors, offering to make Nelson a 'spring suit'.⁶² Nelson's letter suggests that he paid promptly for the four sculptures, enclosing a cheque for £40, receipt of which was acknowledged by Kinnaird the following day.⁶³ However, Kinnaird replied that he could not locate the *rosso antico* fragment, so accordingly enclosed a cheque for £10, returning the payment Nelson had made for that piece. He did, though, make a gift to Nelson of a 'small head as I thought it might interest you'. This is a reference to a head resembling Laocoön (Fig. 5).⁶⁴ Kinnaird added that Nelson's instincts about the supposed antiquity of sculptures he had rejected were correct, adding: 'You were right not to take 32 and 33. Poulsen notes "head modern".'⁶⁵ It is worth noting that Kinnaird makes reference to the assessment of Frederik Poulsen, the noted Danish archaeologist and director of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek in Copenhagen, who was familiar with UK collections, on which he had published *Greek and Roman Portraits in English Country Houses* (1923).

This long letter of 28 June 1949 also indicates that Kinnaird was making suggestions for sculptures that could be of interest to Nelson, namely a bust of the Empress 'Otacilia Severa', now identified as Tranquillina (Fig. 6),⁶⁶ noting that 'replicas' were in the collections of the British Museum⁶⁷ and Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek.⁶⁸ The same letter introduces discussion of a sculpture described as the 'head of a young barbarian', which was clearly much admired by Kinnaird, who proudly states: 'Poulsen described it as follows: "The jewel of the collection. Head of a young barbarian of the time of Hadrian. Well preserved and of expressive appearance".'⁶⁹ It is, however, interesting to observe that the description of Michaelis is much less specific: 'Life-sized

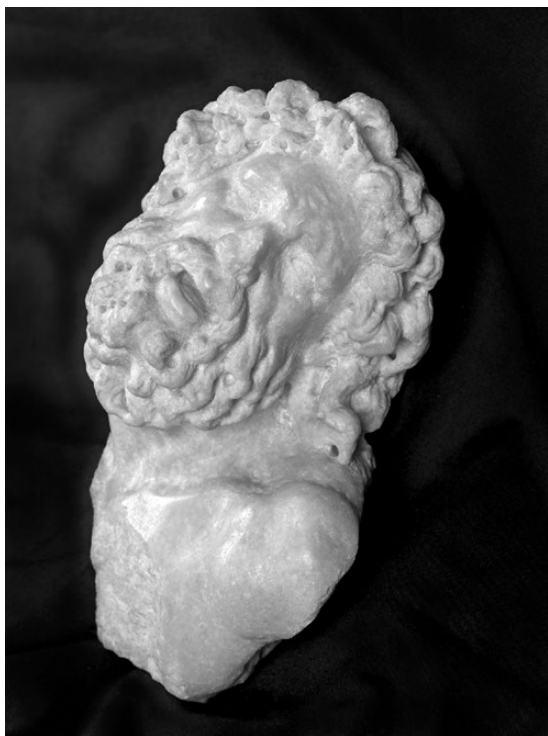


Fig. 5. Head of Laocoön, Roman Imperial, marble. NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.19. Image courtesy National Museums Liverpool (World Museum).

head, attributed without sufficient reason to Lucius Verus.⁷⁰ Nelson was clearly impressed not only by the comments of such a leading figure as Poulsen, but also by the photograph sent by Kinnaird, for he replied on 30 June 1949⁷¹ that he wished to purchase the head of the ‘barbarian’. Kinnaird’s reply was much slower to arrive than his previous correspondence. This may be because the owner of the head was Kinnaird’s son, as indicated by Kinnaird’s statement in a previous letter: ‘My son bought it in [*sic*].’⁷² It is not clear, however, whether the letter refers to the elder son, Graham Charles Kinnaird, later 13th Lord Kinnaird, or the younger, Kenneth George Kinnaird. It appears that not only was Kinnaird’s son unwilling to ‘agree to sell it at a reasonable price’, as his father had suggested,⁷³ but was also apparently very unhappy at his father’s actions. Kinnaird’s rather curt statement to Nelson is ‘No. 26, Barbarian head, we are not selling.’⁷⁴

To complicate matters, the archive includes two letters marked ‘10’, one undated and the other dated



Fig. 6. Head of the empress Tranquillina (formerly identified as Otilia Severa), third century AD, marble. NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.13. Image courtesy National Museums Liverpool (World Museum).

6 July 1949. In the undated Letter 10 in the archive, Nelson asks Kinnaird ‘what sum would be accepted’ for the ‘Barbarian head’ and offering to pay incidental expenses, ‘carriage, etc.’, but in his letter of 30 June 1949⁷⁵ – Letter 8 – Nelson had already offered the sum of £23 for the ‘Barbarian head’ and ‘Otilia Severa’. A further letter from Nelson to Kinnaird also marked ‘10’, sent on 6 July 1949,⁷⁶ repeats the offer of £23 for the two heads, further offering £18 for the ‘Barbarian’ alone; as Kinnaird’s letter of 11 July 1949 indicates, that proposal crossed in the post with Kinnaird’s brusque withdrawal of the ‘Barbarian head’ from the market, also sent on 6 July.⁷⁷ This suggests that the undated draft letter from Nelson, Letter 10, should be identified as a letter sent to Kinnaird between 28 and 30 June 1949, and accordingly that it is incorrectly numbered in the sequence; less plausibly, if it were correctly sequenced, it might indicate that

Nelson simply failed to take account of Kinnaird's son's unwillingness to sell the 'Barbarian head'.

Leaving that aside, perhaps the most interesting aspect of Letter 9 is Kinnaird's admission: 'I regret I gave you a wrong description in my last letter' in respect of the bust he had identified as Otacilia Severa.⁷⁸ Nelson had perhaps suspected this, as he had earlier queried the lot number of this bust in the catalogue of the sale at Sotheby's on 21 December 1948, as the lot in which the Otacilia Severa bust featured consisted of two items.⁷⁹ However, as noted later, Nelson subsequently acquired the bust of Otacilia Severa from the dealer who had purchased it and its companion at the Sotheby's sale.

Kinnaird was very keen to sell a relief head of Caligula, emphasizing its availability on three occasions, although Nelson decided not to purchase it.⁸⁰ But in the letter in which he rejected the relief he expressed interest in the female head that Kinnaird had confused with Otacilia Severa, requesting a 'rough sketch' since it had not been catalogued or photographed.⁸¹ Kinnaird was eager to dispose of this head, as he offered to send it to Nelson 'on approval'.⁸²

It is also apparent that Nelson had not given up hope of acquiring the 'Barbarian head', repeating his offer of £18, though Kinnaird was adamant that it was not available, reporting that his family was 'anxious to keep the head'.⁸³ It should be noted that Kinnaird did not totally dash Nelson's hopes of acquiring the 'Barbarian head', adding later in the same letter that the reduction in accommodation at Rossie Priory owing to the structural changes carried out there could lead to a sale: 'If they find they cannot get a home for it, I will let you know.'⁸⁴ However, around two weeks later, Kinnaird confirms that 'The family want to keep the Barbarian',⁸⁵ perhaps indicating that Nelson was so eager to acquire the 'Barbarian head' that he had sent at least two further letters to Kinnaird during this period which have not been preserved in draft form in the Antiquities archive; one was a letter written on 2 August 1949, referred to by Kinnaird in Letter 18.⁸⁶ Even as late as 27 October of that year,⁸⁷ Nelson was still eager to acquire not only the 'Barbarian head' but also the head of a boy⁸⁸ which he had enquired about earlier,⁸⁹ if the family found that these pieces could not be accommodated in the reduced space available at Rossie Priory. Nelson goes so far as to offer Kinnaird £50, along with packing and carriage, for the two heads. There is no record in the archive of Kinnaird's reply, if any, and there is no evidence that

Nelson ever acquired the pieces; they do not feature in the collection of sculpture acquired by Liverpool Museum in 1953 and listed in online [Appendix 1](#). The 'head of a boy' was not sold by descendants of the Kinnaird family until 2015, when it was purchased by Charles Ede Ltd. of London, and subsequently sold in 2019 to the Saint Louis Art Museum.⁹⁰ Unfortunately, I have not been able to trace the current location of the 'barbarian head'.

Transport of sculpture acquired by Nelson in 1949

The letters in the archive also shed light on arrangements for the transport of sculpture in Britain in the late 1940s. Although Nelson had advised Kinnaird on 27 June 1949 in relation to four heads, for which he was 'arranging with Pickfords for their packing etc',⁹¹ the firm did not arrive at Rossie Priory until 21 July 1949,⁹² over three weeks later, despite Nelson having telephoned them to 'hurry things up'.⁹³ Kinnaird was clearly surprised to learn that 'the man in charge' of the Pickfords transport had advised Nelson that it was not customary to provide a receipt for goods on collection, and he expressed a hope that the sculptures were not damaged in transit.⁹⁴

A further aspect of the transport of small, individual sculptures is revealed by correspondence between Kinnaird and Nelson⁹⁵ regarding the fragment of *rosso antico* marble depicting Dionysos,⁹⁶ which Kinnaird had initially been unable to locate.⁹⁷ Kinnaird wrote that he had discovered the *rosso antico* fragment while in the process of reviewing his collection of Roman mosaics.⁹⁸ Pickfords had visited Rossie Priory the previous day, and a telephone call revealed that the sculptures bought by Nelson had already left on their long journey to Liverpool. As Kinnaird observed, the fragment weighed 'considerably under 15lbs'⁹⁹ and he offered to send it to Nelson either by Pickfords or by parcel post. Furthermore, Kinnaird offered to use a 'local joiner' to make a box for its transport.¹⁰⁰ Although Nelson asked Kinnaird to advise him of packing costs,¹⁰¹ presumably in order to reimburse him, there is no reference to the cost of making the packing case in Kinnaird's letter to Nelson in which he informed him that the *rosso antico* fragment had now been posted.¹⁰²

In addition to Nelson's direct negotiations with Kinnaird, the archives indicate that, after the Sotheby's sale in December 1948, he bought from dealers additional sculptures that had been formerly in the Rossie Priory collection. These were a head of a youth, identified by Poulsen in his 1923 publication as 'Alexander in the character of Apollo' (Fig. 7),¹⁰³ which was initially sold to J.J.E. Potter, an antiquities dealer based in Enfield, near London.¹⁰⁴ Nelson's records indicate that he had paid a premium to Potter to obtain this bust: whereas Potter had paid only £8 at the auction in December 1948, Nelson paid Potter £16 for it in August 1949. This may have occurred shortly after he



Fig. 7. Head of a young Apollo, sometimes identified as a portrait of Alexander the Great, eighteenth century, marble. NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.3. Image courtesy National Museums Liverpool (World Museum).

wrote the missing letter of 2 August 1949 to Kinnaird, as on 23 August he writes that the Alexander bust 'looks imposing in my hall'.¹⁰⁵ Kinnaird, who had previously described it as 'a delightful head',¹⁰⁶ was very pleased to hear this news as he wrote in reply that he 'thought it one of the most attractive'.¹⁰⁷ It is, however, worth noting that in his *Notes and Reminiscences* of 1877 the 9th Lord Kinnaird had misidentified the gender of the individual portrayed, describing him as 'Diana'.¹⁰⁸

Another dealer, F. G. Powell of Brompton Road, London SW3, was involved in Nelson's purchase of two female busts, one described at auction as depicting Otilia Severa,¹⁰⁹ the other described by Poulsen as a 'Roman Lady of Hadrian's Age'.¹¹⁰ Nelson was aware that the busts had initially been purchased by Powell for £4 and was clearly not prepared to pay Powell's asking price of £38 plus 30 shillings for packing and carriage.¹¹¹ Nelson's offer of £35 to include packing and carriage¹¹² was accepted by F. G. Powell and the sale was completed in August 1949.¹¹³ As noted earlier, the bust of 'Otilia Severa' was the source of a mistake on the part of Kinnaird, whose correspondence with Nelson suggests that he believed the bust had remained unsold after the Sotheby's sale of December 1948 and had been returned to the family.¹¹⁴ However, Kinnaird subsequently discovered that there had been confusion with another female head and the bust was, after all, no longer in his possession.¹¹⁵

The archive contains further correspondence relating to Nelson's collection of classical sculpture, with the final documents dating from May 1951, almost two years before Nelson's death. The last correspondence with Kinnaird was in October 1949.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

The sculptures formerly in the Kinnaird collection and acquired by the National Museums Liverpool from Dr Philip Nelson form an attractive and varied group, knowledge and understanding of which is enhanced by the museum's possession of the associated archive of correspondence held by the museum. This provides insights into the way in which private collections of ancient sculpture were formed in the first half of the twentieth century, a period often overlooked in collecting scholarship, together with the practicalities of handling and transporting sculpture. Above all, Nelson's correspondence with the 12th Lord

Kinnaird reveals the way in which a discerning and determined private collector conducted negotiations to augment his collection.

Supplementary material

Two online appendices are available at <https://academic.oup.com/jhc>. Appendix 1 lists sculpture once in the collection at Rossie Priory owned by Philip Nelson and acquired by Liverpool Museum in 1953; Appendix 2 reproduces extracts from correspondence between Philip Nelson and the 12th Lord Kinnaird, and between Nelson and F. G. Powell & Co., regarding sculpture from Rossie Priory.

Address for correspondence

Dr Georgina Muskett, 22 Ravenswood Road, Heswall, Wirral CH1 6UA, UK.
G.M.Muskett@liverpool.ac.uk

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Notes and references

- 1 An account of Nelson's private and professional life, including his short career as a medical doctor, curtailed by illness, can be found in P. Rushton, 'A Liverpool collector: Dr Philip Nelson (1872–1953)', *Apollo* no. 467 (2001), pp. 41–8, esp. pp. 41–3.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 41–2.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 4 P. Nelson, 'Medieval Painted Glass in England, 1170–1501', PhD dissertation, University of Liverpool (1930), Special Collections, ref. THESIS 359A.
- 5 J.M.C. Toynebee, rev. S. L. Dyson, 'Strong [*née* Sellers], Eugénie', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/36352> (accessed 25 July 2023).
- 6 One refers to a bust of Trajan (National Museums Liverpool [World Museum] (hereafter NML [WM]), inv. no. 53.115.4), purchased by Nelson from a private collection in Nottingham; the other to a head of 'Lucilla' (NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.5), which Nelson purchased from the collection at Shobdon Court in Herefordshire.
- 7 Letters, Philip Corder to J. H. Iliffe, 17 March 1953, and Iliffe to Corder, 19 March 1953, Decorative Arts archive, NML [WM].
- 8 'The Collection of Classical Marble Sculptures £1380 Bought by the Museum', Antiquities Archive document, unnumbered, National Museums Liverpool.
- 9 Rushton, op. cit. (note 1), p. 41.
- 10 A. E. Nelson, notebook, Decorative Arts archive, National Museums Liverpool. The front cover is labelled 'N/N17 Liverpool

- Public Museums'. Inside cover: 'Lily Nelson [struck through: 'Beechwood, Beech Lane, Liverpool 18'] 17 Sandy Lane, West Kirby, Cheshire'. The sculptures are listed on pp. 28–30. Mrs Nelson labelled another notebook, N/N16, 'Philip's Treasures'.
- 11 P. Rushton, personal communication.
 - 12 Letter, D.E.L. Haynes to Elaine Tankard, 29 October 1959, Antiquities archive, NML [WM].
 - 13 P. Nelson, 'Four Roman bronze statuettes from Lake Nemi', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 95 (1943), pp. 92–4.
 - 14 S. Haynes, 'The bronze priests and priestesses from Nemi', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts: Römische Abteilung* 67 (1960), pp. 34–45. This summary of bronze figurines said to be from Lake Nemi included three figures (two male, one female; pp. 38–39, nos. 5, 6, 9) formerly in Nelson's collection, for each of which she noted 'Present whereabouts unknown'.
 - 15 Letter, Tankard to Haynes, 4 November 1959, Antiquities archive, NML [WM].
 - 16 For example, wooden casket with scenes from the life of Christ, eleventh century, Cleveland Museum of Art, inv. no. 1953.362; altar cruet, thirteenth century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 47.101.39.
 - 17 Carved ivory plaque depicting the Adoration of the Magi, fourteenth century, British Museum, London, inv. no. 1920.0415.6.
 - 18 Listed in **Appendix 1**: NML [WM], inv. nos. 53.115.1, 53.115.3, 53.115.7, 53.115.10, 53.115.11, 53.115.13, 53.115.14, 53.115.15, 53.115.16, 53.115.17, 53.115.19.
 - 19 The Photographs Collection of the National Portrait Gallery has a bromide print of a photograph of the 12th Lord Kinnaird by Water Stoneman, May 1957, NPG X168766.
 - 20 Listed in online **Appendix 2**. The numbering follows the archive held in the Antiquities Department in NML [WM].
 - 21 Nelson also acquired ancient sculptures from the collections of, among others, Lord Lonsdale, Lord Melchett, Lord St Audries and Lord Hastings, all of which are being researched by the author.
 - 22 www.pickfords.co.uk/pickfords-history (accessed 23 May 2022).
 - 23 **Appendix 2**, Letter 4, Nelson to Kinnaird, 26 June 1949.
 - 24 **Appendix 2**, Letter 6, Nelson to Kinnaird, 27 June 1949.
 - 25 For example, **Appendix 2**, Letter 19a, Nelson to Kinnaird, 27 October 1949.
 - 26 For example, **Appendix 2**, Letter 1, Nelson to Kinnaird, 16 January 1949.
 - 27 **Appendix 2**, Letter 6, Nelson to Kinnaird, 27 June 1949.
 - 28 **Appendix 2**, Letter 2a, Nelson to Kinnaird, 20 June 1949.
 - 29 **Appendix 2**, Letter 18, Kinnaird to Nelson, 11 August 1959.
 - 30 **Appendix 2**, Letter 7, Kinnaird to Nelson, 28 June 1949.
 - 31 **Appendix 2**, Letter 18, Kinnaird to Nelson, 31 August 1949.
 - 32 F. Poulsen, *Greek and Roman Portraits in English Country Houses* (Oxford, 1923), p. 23.
 - 33 A. Michaelis, *Ancient Marbles in Great Britain*, trans. C.A.M. Fennel (Cambridge, 1882).
 - 34 Poulsen, op. cit. (note 32), p. 23. The 9th Lord Kinnaird's publication was *Notes and Reminiscences of Rossie Priory* (Dundee, 1877)

- 35 Sotheby & Co, London, *Catalogue of Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan and Roman Antiquities, American, African and Oceanic Art, etc.: Comprising the property of St. Augustine's College, Canterbury, the property of the late James Reddie Anderson, Esq, the property of the late Baron C. A. de Cosson, the property of the Rt. Hon. Lord Kinnaird and the property of the late Sir Bernard Eckstein, Bt. . . . Monday, 20th December 1948 . . . [and] Tuesday, 21st December 1948, at eleven o'clock precisely* (London, 1948).
- 36 Mentioned in Lord Kinnaird's letter to Nelson, dated 17 June 1949; [Appendix 2](#), Letter 1, indicates that the sale took place from 28 to 30 June 1949.
- 37 Historic Environment Scotland, 'Rossie Priory', at <http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/GDL00331> (accessed 5 August 2022).
- 38 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 16, Kinnaird to Nelson, 26 July 1949.
- 39 NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.11; Sotheby & Co., op. cit. (note 35), p. 18, lot 203. 'A marble figure of Narcissus, leaning on a draped tree-stump on his right, looking downwards, the head turned towards the right, the arms, legs and neck repaired; the head is original but has been broken off and replaced; the restorations are said to be by Canova; 3ft 6in, Roman, 1st Century A.D.', Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), p. 648, no. 1; Poulsen, op. cit. (note 32), p. 25, fig. 30.
- 40 NML [WM], inv. nos. 53.115.1, 53.115.17. Sotheby & Co., op. cit. (note 35), lot 210: 'A marble bust of a goddess, 1st Century A.D., on square base. 19 in; and a double-faced bust of a bearded-man and a girl, 12½ in'.
- 41 Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), p. 649, no. 8; Poulsen, op. cit. (note 32), p. 24, figs. 28, 29; C. Vermeule and D. von Bothmer, 'Notes on a new edition of Michaelis: *Ancient Marbles in Great Britain*', pt. 3/1, *American Journal of Archaeology* 63 (1959), pp. 139–66, esp. p. 161.
- 42 Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), no. 11; Vermeule and von Bothmer, op. cit. (note 41), p. 162.
- 43 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 1, Nelson to Kinnaird, 16 January 1949.
- 44 The database of objects in the Antiquities collections of the World Museum does not list any bronzes acquired by Nelson from Rossie Priory, and it is likely that they were sold separately after Nelson's death. The two bronze heads in the collections (NML [WM], inv. nos. 53.115.8, 53.115.32) do not have a provenance from Rossie Priory.
- 45 9th Lord Kinnaird, op. cit. (note 34).
- 46 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 1, Kinnaird to Nelson, 17 June 1949.
- 47 Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), pp. 649–52.
- 48 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 2a, Nelson to Kinnaird, 20 June 1949.
- 49 [Appendix 2](#), Letters 2a, 2b, 3–7, dated between 20 June and 28 June 1949.
- 50 All references taken from Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), pp. 649–52: 5 Bust of young Dionysus; 6 Bust of Aphrodite; 7 Female head with cap, possibly Persephone.
- 51 All references taken from Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), pp. 649–52. 19 Bust of young man, slight moustache, hair like that of Hadrian; 30 Bust of a young boy, possibly Diadumenianus, son of Emperor Macrinus; 32 Bust of Marcus Aurelius when young; 33 Bust of Alexander Severus.
- 52 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 2a, Nelson to Kinnaird, 20 June 1949.
- 53 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 2b, Nelson to Kinnaird, 20 June 1949.
- 54 NML [WM], inv. nos. 53.115.16, 53.115.15, 53.115.7, respectively.
- 55 NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.10; Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), p. 649, no. 10.
- 56 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 3, Kinnaird to Nelson, 22 June 1949.
- 57 A. Bartie *et al.*, 'Perth Historical Pageant', *The Redress of the Past: Historical pageants in Britain*, at <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants/1160/> (accessed 23 May 2022).
- 58 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 3, Kinnaird to Nelson 22 June 1949.
- 59 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 4, Nelson to Kinnaird, 23 June 1949.
- 60 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 5, Kinnaird to Nelson, 25 June 1949.
- 61 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 6, Nelson to Kinnaird, 27 June 1949.
- 62 At the time of writing (2022), the premises were occupied by a firm of opticians.
- 63 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 7, Kinnaird to Nelson, 28 June 1949.
- 64 NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.19. The head is not mentioned by Michaelis in his publication of 1882.
- 65 Poulsen, op. cit. (note 32), p. 24.
- 66 S. Wood, 'Subject and artist: studies in Roman portraiture of the third century', *American Journal of Archaeology* 85 (1981), pp. 59–68; Wood (p. 60 n. 3) makes reference to the head of Tranquillina in the collections of the NML [WM].
- 67 British Museum, London, inv. no. 1805,0703.107; Wood, op. cit. (note 66), p. 59, pl. 13, fig. 1a–b.
- 68 Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen, inv. no. 1572; Wood, op. cit. (note 66), p. 60, pl. 13, fig. 2a–b.
- 69 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 7, Kinnaird to Nelson, 28 June 1949, quoting from Poulsen, op. cit. (note 32), pp. 88–9, pl. 73(a)–(c).
- 70 Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), p. 651, no. 26.
- 71 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 8, Nelson to Kinnaird, 30 June 1949.
- 72 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 7, Kinnaird to Nelson, 28 June 1949.
- 73 [Appendix 2](#), *ibid.*
- 74 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 9, Kinnaird to Nelson, 6 July 1949.
- 75 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 8, Nelson to Kinnaird, 30 June 1949.
- 76 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 10 (note the duplicate numbering in the Antiquities archive), Nelson to Kinnaird, 6 July 1949.
- 77 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 11, Kinnaird to Nelson, 11 July 1949.
- 78 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 9, Kinnaird to Nelson, 6 July 1949.
- 79 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 8, Nelson to Kinnaird, 30 June 1949.
- 80 Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), p. 653, No. 61. 'Head resembling Caligula, turned r. Is now on an oval field. Appears suspicious.'
- 81 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 12, Nelson to Kinnaird, 12 July 1949.
- 82 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 11, Kinnaird to Nelson, 11 July 1949.
- 83 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 16, Kinnaird to Nelson, 26 July 1949.
- 84 [Appendix 2](#), *ibid.*
- 85 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 18, Kinnaird to Nelson, 11 August 1949.
- 86 [Appendix 2](#), *ibid.*
- 87 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 19a, Nelson to Kinnaird, 27 October 1949.
- 88 Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), p. 651, no. 27.
- 89 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 18a, Nelson to Kinnaird, 23 August 1949.
- 90 Saint Louis Art Museum, inv. no. 92:2019.
- 91 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 6, Nelson to Kinnaird, 27 June 1949.
- 92 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 13, Kinnaird to Nelson, 21 July 1949.

- 93 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 12, Nelson to Kinnaird, 12 July 1949.
- 94 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 13, Kinnaird to Nelson, 21 July 1949.
- 95 [Appendix 2](#), Letters 14–17, dated between 22 and 31 July 1949.
- 96 NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.10; Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), p. 649, no. 10.
- 97 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 7, Kinnaird to Nelson, 28 June 1949.
- 98 The mosaics referred to by Kinnaird in Letter 14 are apparently now in a private collection in Chicago; ‘Eight panels from a mosaic floor’, in R. Sabino and K. Raff, *Roman Art at the Art Institute of Chicago* (Chicago, 2017), cat. nos. 146–53.
- 99 That is, less than 7 kg. The weight of the sculpture has been checked by staff at the World Museum, who confirm that the total weight of the sculpture on its marble plinth is 3.28 kg (7.23 lb). My thanks to Barbara Rowan and Leila Gwynne for facilitating this.
- 100 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 14, Kinnaird to Nelson, 22 July 1949.
- 101 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 15, Nelson to Kinnaird, 23 July 1949.
- 102 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 17, Kinnaird to Nelson, 31 July 1949, in which he indicates that the head was posted the previous Friday, that is, 29 July 1949.
- 103 NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.3; Sotheby & Co., op. cit. (note 35), lot 211: ‘A massive heroic head of Alexander the Great’; Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), p. 650, no. 17; Poulsen, op. cit. (note 32), p. 38, pl. 10.
- 104 A letter to Nelson from J.J.E. Potter (Antiquities archive, NML [WM], inv. no. 45) indicates that Potter may no longer have been using his premises at 60 High Street, Enfield, as this is struck out on the letterhead and replaced with the handwritten address ‘Lyndhurst, Carterhatch Road, Enfield Highway, Middx.’
- 105 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 18a, Nelson to Kinnaird, 23 August 1949.
- 106 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 18, Kinnaird to Nelson, 11 August 1949.
- 107 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 19, Kinnaird to Nelson, 31 August 1949.
- 108 Quoted by Poulsen, op. cit. (note 32), p. 38.
- 109 NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.13; the name is spelled ‘Ottacilia Tevera’ in the auction catalogue, Sotheby & Co., op. cit. (note 35), lot 213: ‘Ottacilia Tevera, wife of the emperor Philippus Arabs’; Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), p. 651, no. 31.
- 110 Poulsen, op. cit. (note 32), p. 86, pl. 70; NML [WM], inv. no. 53.115.14; Michaelis, op. cit. (note 33), p. 651 no. 28. Both busts had been included in the Sotheby’s sale of 1948 as a single lot, Sotheby & Co., op. cit. (note 35), lot 213: ‘Roman portrait bust of Ottacilia Tevera . . . and another Roman portrait bust of a woman’.
- 111 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 30a, F. G. Powell to Nelson, 9 August 1949.
- 112 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 31, Nelson to F. G. Powell, undated.
- 113 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 31a, F. G. Powell to Nelson, 11 August 1949.
- 114 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 7, Kinnaird to Nelson, 28 June 1949.
- 115 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 9, Kinnaird to Nelson, 6 July 1949.
- 116 [Appendix 2](#), Letter 19a, Nelson to Kinnaird, 27 October 1949.