

Introduction

The private collection of engraved gems and related objects, which is presented to a wider audience in this book, embraces a broad range of both geographical and chronological areas that can be properly described with one word – eclecticism. Although the information about the history of this assemblage is vague, closer examination of the material reveals the intention to build up a cabinet that would illustrate development of glyptic art from the very beginning to contemporary times. This is very true for other aspects of the Natsvlishvili Family collecting habits as it managed to gather Egyptian, Near Eastern, Greek and Roman antiquities together with modern paintings, sculpture, porcelain and other objects of various kinds, provenance and chronology. The structure of the collection also confirms a special interest in stone materials by the creator of the cabinet – Konstantine Natsvlishvili (1918–1993), as apart from being a successful engineer, he was also a keen mineralogist. The nearly 200 objects exhibit biographical links. Some groups were probably incorporated into the cabinet from older Russian collections, whereas others have been unearthed in the neighbourhoods of Tbilisi, Mtskheta and Kutaisi. Many objects were purchased from the art market in the capital city of Georgia – Tbilisi, which already in the second half of the 19th century had become a significant art trade centre in this part of the world. In the course of the 20th century, Tbilisi became an even more attractive location for dealers of antiquities and works of art to have their businesses there. This was due to, firstly, the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the Soviet reality that came into being shortly after it in 1922, as well as the Second World War that came to an end in 1945.

Georgia still surprises us with the richness of its cultural heritage and collections of art of all kinds in its possession. The priceless heritage of Georgia results from the fact that it was always located in the intersection of great Eurasian civilisations, which is confirmed by the diverse archaeological heritage. Deposits of natural resources, especially

precious metals, as well as being on the Silk Road guaranteed economic success and resulted in creation of the strong nobility class that invested heavily in collecting artworks. The rapid industrialisation during the Soviet period boosted the country's development as well. All these factors contributed to the current state of Georgian cultural heritage. It is not only an effect of national pride, but also of private interests in art among many individuals in the past and present who often emigrated and came back with newly acquired artworks enriching it. This heritage is safeguarded and preserved in museums and collections throughout Georgia. Naturally, the state takes a leading role in this task, but private collectors should also contribute, especially if the objects they hold are of high aesthetic, scientific and cultural value, and invaluable contribute to our understanding of past societies and products they manufactured.

This is very much the case of this collection which was not dispersed after the death of its former owner or sold abroad by descendants as was often the practice in Georgia in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. In contrast, the descendant, being proud of the past accomplishment of his grandfather and preceding generations, decided to share a part of his heritage worldwide and expose it to critical investigations for the first time. This in short order presented the typical problem of all private and public collections of engraved gems: which objects are genuinely ancient, which are modern works of this miniature art and which are contemporary fakes. The particularly exciting issue of the distinction between these categories is addressed in a short introductory essay. This was possible as the book includes both the ancient material produced locally and originating from the neighbouring regions of the Near East or brought by the Roman armies and the Renaissance, Baroque and Neo-Classical (especially Russian) gems testifying the tremendously important role of Tbilisi as an art market centre since the second half of the 19th century. Georgia is famous for its ancient goldsmithing, icons and many more, however, it is

little known for being the art trade centre it has been for centuries. Right now, the country is on the course not only to make its cultural accomplishments available for everyone, but also to make its past significance as an art trade centre more recognisable. This includes state encouragement for private collections to be revealed rather than kept in secrecy and publication of the Natsvlishvili Family collection of engraved gems is one step towards that goal. Moreover, ancient gems, many of which possibly are local products, attract attention because they illustrate provincial specifics that are difficult to notice due to the scarcity of reference material published in Georgia itself and beyond. This depicts the need to embark on profound research on the subject of engraved gems from Georgia in the future, especially on the museum collections which offer more reliable provenance information.

In addition to this, the Natsvlishvili Family collection includes examples of the post-war production of fake antiquities in the Near East and illustrate another serious problem with studies of the gems from this area. These are usually neglected both in the research and publications, but they are deliberately studied and presented here to illustrate this serious and current issue. Many fake engraved

gems are circulating on the market while this book is being written and new ones are constantly produced to deceive not only collectors, but also the academia community at large. Identification of some fakes should help both groups, which is another asset of the publication. After all, it will become clear, some forgeries are works of art in their own merits, thus, from an aesthetic point of view, they ought not to be excluded.

Finally, at some points, the book also proves the great importance of provenance studies. Nowadays, this should be a priority no matter whether the collection is being formed by a private individual or an institution. If there had been sufficient information about objects' history, their dates would have been less controversial. The book itself is a clear manifesto of Polish-Georgian friendship and cooperation as well. Respect for cultural heritage is one of the many qualities both countries share and cherish.

It is somehow symbolic that the research and publication of the Natsvlishvili Family collection take place around 100 years after the birth of its creator. In this way, his enthusiasm towards art and minerals shall be properly celebrated.