

THE STORY OF A MALACHITE VASE

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The Metropolitan Museum has recently purchased from Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt one of the most arresting objects to enter its collections in many a day. It is a heroic vase of malachite—with its pedestal it is a little more than nine feet in height—which for more than sixty years was the most conspicuous single ornament in the Vanderbilt house at 640 Fifth Avenue. This fabulous vase was bought in 1880 by William H. Vanderbilt, the original owner of the house, at the sale of the contents of the San Donato Palace in Florence. It was placed in the center of the marble entrance vestibule when the house was finished at the close of 1881.

When the house came into the possession of Brigadier General Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1915, it underwent drastic renovations. Under the direction of Horace Trumbauer, the Philadelphia architect, the exterior was simplified and the interior almost completely redecorated. The original lush and costly decorations by Herter Brothers had been the last word of "good taste" in their day but by 1915 were hopelessly outmoded. French eighteenth-century paneled rooms were now installed and appropriately furnished. The great central hall of the house, originally known as the "atrium," was handsomely decorated in Caen stone in the classic manner, and the malachite vase became its dominant feature. Its brilliant green coloring and distinguished gilt-bronze ornaments could now be seen to advantage for the first time.

Such is the more recent history of the vase. Of its earlier existence the salient facts are known but, until European archives are again accessible, certain of the details must be hypothesized. There is no doubt as to when and by whom the ornamental bronzes and the original bronze pedestal were made, for on the top member of the pedestal is the inscription THOMIRE A PARIS, 1819. Thomire et Cie, headed

by Pierre Philippe Thomire (1751-1843), were a Parisian firm celebrated for the production of ornaments in bronze and gilt-bronze. In 1819, at which time their workshop was located at 7 rue Boucherat, they entered in the Industrial Exposition at the Louvre a vase that may be ours. The catalogue describes it as "A great vase of Medici form, veneered with malachite; three meters (nine feet) high; richly decorated with trophies surmounted by winged figures of Fame about to blow trumpets; with a superb crowning circlet of laurel leaves and a quarter-round ovolo molding with beads; the whole in gilt-bronze with a mat finish." While this entry is brief and incomplete, there is nothing in it to dispute the likelihood that either our vase—or one exactly like it—is being described. In *Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection*, privately printed in 1884, our malachite vase is said to be "one of a pair," of which "the other stands in the palace of the Czar of Russia." As yet, however, it has been impossible to verify this statement.

There is little doubt that the malachite part of the vase was executed in Russia. The Ural Mountains have long supplied the world's finest malachite, much of it coming from copper mines in the vicinity of the great mining center of Nizhne-Tagilsk founded at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Nikita Demidoff of the noted Russian family. For a period of more than two hundred years, ending only with the Revolution, the Demidoffs owned and operated most of the important mines throughout this area, deriving immense wealth from them. It will be seen, a little later, that this fact has an important bearing on the Vanderbilt vase.

About seventy-five miles to the southeast of Nizhne-Tagilsk is the great city of Sverdlovsk, the capital of the Ural region. Formerly known as Ekaterinburg, it was here that Czar Nicholas II and his family met their death in



*Vase of Russian malachite with gilt-bronze mounts made by Thomire of Paris in 1819.
Exhibited on the east balcony of the Great Hall of the Museum*

1918. In 1765 there was established in Ekaterinburg a factory, later to become celebrated throughout the world, for the cutting and polishing of the many varieties of precious and semiprecious stones with which the Urals abound.

It is very likely that it was in Ekaterinburg that our malachite vase originally took shape. The natural malachite, in stalagmite form, was first cut in cross sections to reveal the beautiful zoning and variations of coloring to fullest advantage. These sections were then embedded, mosaic-like, in cement on a metal body and the interspaces filled with more cement in which powdered malachite and small fragments of the stone were incorporated for harmonious effect. The surface of the resulting veneer was then ground smooth with emery and polished with tripoli. This part of the vase was then shipped to Paris for the addition of Thomire's bronze ornaments and pedestal.

The Demidoff family enters the history of our vase in the person of Count Nicholas, a great-grandson of Nikita. After a varied career in which, among other things, he served as aide to Prince Potemkin in the war against the Turks, Nicholas retired to Italy and, reputedly for reasons of health, took up his residence in Florence. For a time he held the post of Russian ambassador to the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. He first lived on the Lungarno Serristori, not far from the Ponte alle Grazie, where his name is perpetuated in the Piazza Demidoff. In 1814 he bought the old Convent of San Donato, about a mile outside the Porta al Prato, where he proceeded to build a palace of such size and magnificence as to evoke the astonishment of all who saw it.

His choice of this location, however, was questioned more than once. As one writer put it somewhat later, "What could have been his reason for choosing such a site for the display of his riches it is hard to imagine, unless he preferred to have as little help from nature as possible. There is not in all the suburbs of Florence another spot so destitute of natural advantages. The dilapidated convent stood in a marshy meadow through which

flowed a sluggish stream [the Mugnone, a tributary of the Arno]. The surrounding country was low and covered with ugly little villages, and the atmosphere was full of malaria. The mile of road between the Porta Prato and San Donato is even now the ugliest drive about Florence, and the lavish sums of money expended on the grounds of the villa have not availed to make them anything more than mediocre in their appearance, the flatness of the land precluding much variety of arrangement."

But none of these depressing facts deterred Count Nicholas, and the Palace of San Donato rose apace. The vast dwelling itself is said to have contained well over a hundred rooms, including twenty-three great salons and a grand staircase surmounted by a towering gilded cupola. The surrounding marshland "was soon converted into a busy and prosperous place as around the villa grew up workshops which gave employment to hundreds of families, and the greenhouses became the wonder of Florence for their vast extent and their collection of rare plants."

It is obvious that so impressive an establishment called for furnishings on an equally grand scale, and Count Nicholas set about to provide them. Among the many objects of art which were brought to San Donato shortly after its completion was our malachite vase. Whether the vase was especially ordered by the count or was produced by Thomire as a tour de force for the Exposition of 1819 and then sold to him we do not know. But since malachite and other semiprecious stones of Russian origin were utilized in many ways in the furnishings of San Donato and are generally conceded to have come from the family mines in the Ural Mountains, the first possibility is by far the more likely. The palace also contained numerous other examples of the work of Thomire in such varied forms as vases, clocks, candelabra, tables, and *surtouts de table*.

Nicholas Demidoff died in 1828, leaving San Donato to his son Anatole, who, in 1840, married Mathilde, the daughter of Napoleon's brother Jerome Bonaparte. For the brief

period of their married life San Donato was the scene of memorable festivities. But Anatole is said to have neglected and beaten his wife, and she to have delighted in tormenting him. Be that as it may, she retreated to France, and when he died in 1870, having been made a prince by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, he left San Donato to his nephew Paul.

It was Prince Paul Demidoff who in 1880 startled Florence by announcing his intention of selling San Donato and its contents and of making his future home at the villa which he had acquired a few years before at Prato-lino. The sale was set to begin on March 15, and it is said that during the preceding two weeks as many as a hundred thousand people made the tour of the palace and its grounds. Prominent dealers from all the capitals of Europe came to Florence, together with many famous collectors or their agents. It was estimated that at least eight hundred visitors arrived for the occasion, and the hotels were taxed to capacity.

Charles Pillet, the noted Parisian auctioneer, was in charge of the sale. A contemporary newspaper account vividly describes the scene at the palace: "The sale took place . . . in a large room at the head of the grand staircase and was very interesting and exciting to a looker-on as well as to the bidders. M. Pillet with his secretary enters upon the scene precisely at 1 o'clock every day, and mounts the steps of a small tribune, with a glass door at each side and open in front down to the desk on which he leans, and at which his secretary records the sales. This tribune is upholstered in dark maroon. M. Pillet is faultlessly attired in black and wields an ivory hammer with ebony handle. It is the very *crème de la crème* of an auction; but none the less it means business and goes on with a rapidity which here, at least, is quite unknown. . . . M. Pillet's keen blue eyes scan the faces of all, and

when the bidding lags, he comes in with a 'Voyez vite, messieurs'; and the best of it is that he knows when it is time to stop, so that if one article does not bring quite what was expected, the next ten will bring more than they would otherwise, from the impression that he has created that there is no time to be lost if one means to secure them."

This was the occasion on which Mr. Vanderbilt's agent acquired the fine malachite vase that has now come into the possession of the Metropolitan Museum. It stood in a great room known as the "Grand Galerie de Canova" because it contained the sculptor's famous seated portrait of Napoleon's mother, Laetitia Bonaparte. In the sale catalogue the vase (no. 1019) is described as supporting nineteen gilt-bronze candle-branches which transformed it into an enormous candelabrum. These no longer exist, although the wooden structure which held them is still in place. They were probably an after-thought and, as such, were discarded before the vase was shipped to this country.

Among the thousands of visitors to the Museum who will see the vase every year there is bound to be much difference of opinion as to its merits. Some will admire it, and others will find little to be said for it. Those who like the vase will derive pleasure from its fine proportions and contours, from the rich coloring and technical perfection of the malachite veneer, and from the beautiful chiseling and gilding of the bronzes. Those who dislike it will argue that it is a bold attempt of a generally uninspired era to compensate in sheer extravagance for a lack of real aesthetic virtue. To these latter it will be just an expensive, oversized ornament in that cut-and-dried pseudo-classical manner known as the "Empire Style." But whatever the reaction, one thing is certain, that few visitors will ignore the vase. It is far too compelling for that.