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John Spring

Ancient Coin Auction Catalogues 1880–1980

London, published by the author and distributed by Spinks, 2009.
xlii + 374 pp., with many illustrations in black and white, colored end papers and printed board covers. ISBN 10: 1-902040-88-0; ISBN 13: 978-1-902040-88-2

The problem about writing a favorable book review is that, quite frankly, writing a bad review is much easier! After all, finding fault is much more fun than being laudatory, so what should I do about this book, which I both like very much, and would recommend to everyone who is seriously interested in the history of numismatics?

John Spring is, among other things, a numismatic bookseller; but he is a special one who became interested in the dealers and collectors whose names we all know but whose lives and histories are usually obscure to us. This interest grew and grew, primarily because a major part of the literature JS dealt in consisted of the great numismatic auction catalogues of the past, and JS wanted to know more about the people whose collections they contained, and who the dealers were who classified and sold them. In the end JS decided to make a special, annotated listing of all those «classic» auction catalogues of ancient coins. His major criterion was that these catalogues had to be illustrated with photographic plates (either of the actual coins or of plaster casts), thus allowing him to exclude all that were printed prior to the year 1880 when numismatic photographs first began to appear (though he has included a few post-1880 sales illustrated by engravings). He also decided to narrow his scope and include only those catalogues that contained at least one full plate of ancient coins before 1914, two plates prior to 1945, and at least five up to 1980; conversely, he included a few, primarily 19th century, catalogues without plates because they supplied provenances to later ones that had them. His cut-off date of 1980 was chosen because the ever-increasing numbers of photographs that appeared in catalogues after that date would have made it necessary to include vast numbers of additional catalogues and firms. Despite these *caveats,* JS lists an astonishing 886 catalogues for the 101 years starting on 1st January 1880 and ending on December 31st 1980 (an amazing 8.7 catalogues a year).

Within this listing JS has provided biographies and photographs of the dealers who produced those catalogues and numerous biographies and some photographs of the collectors whose collections appeared within them. This leads to my only, perhaps unfair, criticism of this book: *it's not longer!* JS has included the stories of many collectors, but this information is primarily taken from obituaries in numismatic publications, or from the commentaries in the auction catalogues themselves, rather than through his own research in dictionaries of national biography or other, similar sources. Such as the easily findable facts that the «late Maxime Collignon» (1849–1917) who was one of the sellers (termed *vendors* by JS) in Naville II (catalogue 472) was a distinguished archaeologist and scholar (Collignon's co-seller in that sale, Paul Vautier, seems to have been Swiss,

but JS does not tell us about him either), or that Winifred Lamb (1894–1963), one of the sellers in Ars Classica XVI (catalogue no. 485) was not only a famous archaeologist but also the Honorary Keeper of Greek and Roman antiquities at the Fitzwilliam from 1920 to 1958. Or what about Robert Carfrae, whose sale in 1894 in London contained what may have been the most expensive ancient coin ever sold (the Pandosia, lot 34, now in Boston)? We have no note about who he was, though he was well-known enough to have appeared in the third edition of Gnecchi's *Guida Numismatica* of 1894 – no. 2630). Nor has there been any attempt to identify the owners of the collections that appeared mysteriously in so many anonymous or semi-anonymous sales: such as the 1902 Hirsch auction (cataogue 367) that contained, among others, the coins belonging to «Comte G. in C. ‹and› Herr B. in N.»; or the «bekannte französische Amateur» of Hirsch XXVI in 1910 (catalogue 382; could it have been Pozzi? – in Hirsch's own catalogue the coins of that section were all marked with the code letter P). And who was Dr. Rousset of Philadelphia whose collection was sold in 1908 (catalogue 14) or R. de Castro Maya whose collection went in 1957 (catalogue 52; both were Bourgey sales)? This is not just quibbling, but I suppose that had JS gone to the effort of tracking down all those people, this book would have been double its present size and would probably have come out posthumously! And what we do have is so useful that we simply must be eternally thankful.

The book begins with an introduction explaining the way the book is organized, and how the catalogues that appear within it were selected. This is followed by a bibliography of books and articles that either contain lists of important auction catalogues, as that in Babelon's Traité, or biographic information on the dealers and collectors involved. It is within this section that JS begins his felicitous use of illustrations to show us what the scholars who wrote these books looked like; photographs, and a few drawings or engravings, are also liberally scattered throughout the rest of the book, among the listed catalogues, bearing portraits of collectors and dealers, as well as views of the buildings that contained some of the famous old firms themselves. The introductory material ends with a summary list of all the auctions that appear in this book: sensibly it is in alphabetical order, but the list, which is that used in the catalogue itself, is chronologically modified to ensure that earliest catalogues always come first (i.e., Etienne Bourgey comes before Emile Bourgey, etc.). The book ends with two series of tables: the first, pp. 335–348, contains what JS believes are the most important sales of various categories (Greek, Roman Republican, etc.) as determined by the number of plates devoted to them; the second (pp. 349–369) is by vendor (by which JS means the coins' owners and not the auctioneers who sold them).

Of course, the heart of this book is the listing of the catalogues, arranged by firm (pp. 1–334), usually preceded by a history of the firm itself or of the firm's principals, and then chronologically. A useful touch is that the non-ancient holdings of owners whose ancient coins appear here are also listed if they too were in named sales (as with the Lockett collection, catalogues 231–235 and 239, but fully listed on p. 89). The amount of information that is found here is extraordinary: among other things JS tells us how many plates of ancient coins the auction catalogue had; the address of the firm and where the auction was held (if they differ as they often do); bibliographic information, if any; cross

references; on occasion, portraits of the owners or dealers; and, again on occasion, notes about the collector or the collection. What is not included, for some of the earlier catalogues, as the Rhousopoulos sale of 1905 (Hirsch XIII = catalogue 371), is precisely how long the sale lasted (we know it began on the 15th of May, but the fact that it went on for two weeks is unnoted). Another factor is that while JS does list the number of lots and plates within each catalogue, he does not list the number of coins illustrated or the number of coins within the sale: thus, auction 636, the Strozzi sale of 1907, is listed as having 2222 lots and 21 plates, but it is not mentioned that the plates contain the illustrations of only 507 coins and 1 gem (with an additional 27 engraved illustrations in the text) and that the total number of coins in the sale was actually a minimum of 5914 (3692 additional pieces in numbered multiple lots plus large numbers of uncounted pieces, primarily bronzes). It might be worth mentioning that the sale, which lasted eight days, took 36 hours to complete: only 61 lots an hour! There are also a few minor mistakes, such as the comment about Jameson and Gulbenkian on p. 228: rather than buying all the Jameson pieces through Hirsch, Gulbenkian actually had first pick through E. S. G Robinson, but was too cheap and did not allow Robinson to select more than a certain number of coins. As a result, when Hirsch obtained the rest of the collection he offered a considerable number to Gulbenkian, who ended up buying them from Hirsch at a much higher price than he would have paid had he bought them directly from the Jameson family (which Robinson would have done had he been allowed to).

Nevertheless, I think JS has to be greatly thanked for producing this book. It is a «labor of love» that contains a wealth of information about ancient coins and the coin trade, as well as a reminder of how closely intertwined dealers, collectors and scholars have always been. It is also a wonderful bibliographic and bibliophilic work of reference that puts a great deal of data, hitherto only found in all manner of places scattered over a considerable area, into a single, convenient volume. For me, its only fault is that it is not bigger and filled with more biographies of the collectors and dealers of the past. Yet I find this a book of such fascination that I simply cannot praise it enough: I think everyone who is interested in the history of numismatics will feel the same.

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