

**A TIMELESS CLASSIC:  
THE STORY OF THE DINIACOPOULOS FAMILY COLLECTION**

*Clarence Epstein*

From their formative years in Constantinople and Cairo and early expeditions throughout Europe, the Middle East and Asia Minor, to their decisive move from France to Canada soon after World War II, Vincent and Olga Diniacopoulos led fascinating lives. The geographically winding road that brought about the formation of one of the most important collections of antiquities in Canada could be the basis for a film the likes of "The Maltese Falcon" or "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre". In fact, a writer, having met the couple and visited the collection soon after its first public display in Québec, had already suggested that the National Film Board produce a documentary on the subject (Anon.: 1954a). Regardless of which movie format is eventually chosen, the Diniacopoulos story is well worth recording.

To fully appreciate a storyline that encompasses the entire twentieth century, one must travel back to 1998 when this writer was a frequent guest at the Diniacopoulos family residence located on one of the verdant slopes of Montreal. With every visit, the experience was similar to that of exploring a sacred temple, where permission to move from the public to the most private spaces was a guarded privilege. The presentation procedure was ritualised: Step one: From street side, proceed along a short, paved walk, then up several steps to the landing and stop next to a bench, upon which an indistinguishable but definitely, ancient stone fragment was weighing down the recyclables of the week; Step two: Stand directly in front of the door in full view of the side window and ring the bell continuously for one or two minutes. Step three: Wait.

In due time the nonagenarian face of Olga Nicolas-Diniacopoulos (called affectionately the Madame) would peer out suspiciously from behind the drapes. After nodding her head to acknowledge the scheduled visit, she would adjust her hearing-aid contraption, remove the cigarette from her mouth, and methodically unfasten the many door locks. If it was not too cold, she would step out onto the landing, scan her property, then retreat into the vestibule and wave entry. The Madame would back up into the vestibule, nod again, widen her eyes, and pacing her speech to deal with the staggered breaths of a life-long smoker, would say, "On a du travail à faire".

In most rooms there was barely space to walk without having to negotiate piles of research notes and boxes of dust-laden artefacts. Old Master paintings were stacked in coat closets; fragments of Greek vases were strewn in fruit baskets just above a toilet; Iznik pottery was stored in the pantry next to jars of oregano; hordes of silver coins sat in cookie jars; Louristan bronzes were piled on a window ledge; and a three-thousand year-old Egyptian sarcophagus leaned against the washing machine. The entire basement level was lined with shelves of incunabula and massive wooden crates, some of which had not been opened for decades. In fact, the rear walls of the house were designed with specially- hinged windows to

allow for the deposit of monumental works. It was a house/museum not unlike that of the eccentric architect, Sir Joan Sloane in London.

The formidable but daunting task at hand was to evaluate and subsequently disperse more than two thousand objects spanning five millennia of human civilisation. The collection comprised of Egyptian, Asian, Near and Middle Eastern, Greek, Roman and Pre-Columbian antiquities; Byzantine icons; European tapestries and ceramics; African, Chinese and Japanese decorative art; hundreds of paintings ranging from the fourteenth to the twentieth century; as well as scores of coins, jewellery, rare books, manuscripts and catalogues. It took nearly two years of visits to identify, catalogue and remove all the objects from the home. With the Madame involved in every step of the process, it became the unique privilege of this writer to be tutored in ancient history by this beguiling woman.

As a widow who had recently lost her only child, Denis Diniacopoulos, a Communications professor at Concordia University, she took the difficult decision to disperse the family collection and donate a portion of the proceeds to create a significant scholarship fund at that university. Many of the valuable works were auctioned at international sales rooms (Sotheby's, 1999-2000) and a number of select institutions were allowed to acquire pieces. The Royal Ontario Museum, for instance, received a lebes gamikos by the Washing Painter as well as three near life-size seated figures from a Theban tomb that was recorded in the 1820s by French archaeologist, J.F. Champollion, while a bronze hydria, originally awarded to an athlete during the ancient Greek Dioscouroi games, was acquired by Curator Emeritus, Dietrich von Bothmer, for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In a subsequent interview with the seasoned collector, Dr. von Bothmer flaunted a file that he had faithfully kept since the 1950s when he was first offered the Diniacopoulos hydria. Sitting in the posh patrons' lounge of the museum, von Bothmer, in his patrician manner, took long and measured sips of his coffee and recounted the story of his pursuit of this bronze vessel and its historical importance. He had only sparse information, however, about the gentleman who approached him almost fifty years earlier.

Vinkentios Diniacopoulos (1886-1967) was born in Constantinople of Greek parents during the reign of Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid. Educated in local seminaries, by age fourteen he was already roaming the Turkish countryside in search of ancient relics. While serving in the Greek Army infirmaries during the 1914 Balkan War, he started collecting Byzantine icons. By 1922, Vincent, as he was called by then, was based in Paris and Alexandria. (Fig. 1.1) He participated in numerous excavations in Asia Minor and the Middle East, often enlisting the assistance of villagers who knew the areas (Bonin, 1954: 67). He subsidised his passion for archaeology through his private dealings and services in art restoration. It was during this thirty-year period that he amassed a large part of the family collection.

His future wife, Hélène Olga Nicolas (1906-2000) was born in Cairo. Her Greek father was an engineer enlisted for the construction of the Suez Canal. At the age of seventeen she moved to Paris and three years later married Vincent, who was twenty years her senior (Fig. 1.2). In 1930 they had their only child, Denis, and lived comfortably in the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. Olga

studied archaeology at the École du Louvre and at the Sorbonne. In the years prior to World War II, the husband/wife team were well ensconced in the antiquities trade, having been enlisted by such noteworthy institutions, as the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Metropolitan Museum to gather works in Egypt (Fig. 1.3) and Asia Minor (Lafond, 1956:15).

During the occupation of Paris, the family spent considerable time in their second residence in the town of La Ciotat, just East of Marseilles. It was at this stage that they made the decision to leave Europe and settle in North America. Once peace was declared, they began consolidating their assets and in 1951 set off on the Empress of Canada for Montreal. They took with them twenty-two crates of artwork from France, six from Syria and twelve from Egypt, but had to leave a number of works behind in Cairo because they could not get permission from the government to remove them (Bieler, 1954/55). It was altogether fateful that on this long boat ride across the Atlantic, they met two French-Canadian clergymen returning from a trip to Europe: Paul Leboeuf, Procurator of the Séminaire de Valleyfield and Marc Dulude, chaplain of the École d'agriculture de Sainte Martine. Owing to their shared antiquarian interests, a friendship was forged between Dulude and the couple that would bear fruit some years later.

With few other professional contacts on which to rely, settling in to Montreal must have been difficult. Given the dynamic caused by the co-existence of Anglo-Protestant and French-Canadian Catholic communities, the city was extremely polarised. In the hopes of an easier social integration, they assumed "Vincent" as their surname since it was easier to spell and pronounce in both French and English. Their first attempts at finding an institutional home for the family collection were equally challenging. One newspaper reporter noted that, despite the fact that the Diniacopoulos works could constitute an entire antiquities department in some museums, "M. Vincent a passé plusieurs mois, vers le printemps dernier, à chercher une organization qui accepterait en don sa magnifique collection. Tout le monde l'a refusée, pour une raison ou pour une autre" (Anon., 1954c).

Another journalist commented that the pieces should have been the envy of major Canadian museums and was convinced that mid-sized American cities would have jumped at the occasion to acquire this collection had they known what little interest was garnered among the amateurs of art in Montreal. This failure to find a public venue in Montreal prompted the couple to take some important steps. In 1954, they decided to open "Ars Classica" on Sherbrooke Street just west of the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts. With the tastes of local collectors being largely conservative, most commercial galleries were offering Dutch and Old Master paintings. The Diniacopoulos gallery, however, showcased a wide range of antiquities as well as European and contemporary Canadian paintings. It was a small and sombre space, a visit to which was described by one visitor as like walking into a beautiful tomb filled with precious objects (Gladu, 1956: 54). One imagines it as being very similar to the experience of touring the family home, but less dusty, for sure.

It was also at this time that their relationship with Marc Dulude produced important results. Dulude acted as the intermediary for the creation of an archaeological museum at the

Séminaire de Valleyfield, an affiliate of the Université de Montréal located sixty kilometres Southwest of the metropolis (Anon., 1954e: 1). He argued that its creation would advance collegial classical studies, noting that one could not underestimate the relevance of these works to French Canada (Bonin, 1954: 67). The annual calendar stated that the new museum was bringing to the Québec population a wonderful tribute to ancient societies that had been overlooked for many centuries (Annuaire, 1953-1954: 59). In effect, the Valleyfield museum was comprised entirely of objects from the family collection (Fig.4). With so few holdings of antiquities in Canadian museums, one reviewer declared that the collection was one of the most important of its kind (Déziel, 1955: 20).

Another reviewer added that the growing collection of Mr. Diniacopoulos - archaeologist, scholar and connoisseur - would become the most outstanding of its type in the country, second only to the holdings of the Royal Ontario Museum (Greening, 1954: 25). Addressing three hundred guests at the inaugural reception, Vincent declared that the exhibition represented the crowning achievement of his life (Anon., 1954). Despite the presumed disappointment of settling on such a parochial venue for its display, this heartfelt comment reinforces the genuinely didactic motive behind the collection. Writing in the small, illustrated catalogue, the couple asserted that history should be considered the first of the sciences because of the means by which it synthesises ideas. They argued that while natural science may help us to decipher animals and plants, history teaches us to decode human existence and to understand it. To comprehend why Greece became the cradle of western civilisation, they argued (Vincent, 1954: 3), one must examine the cultures that were crucial to the formation of its precepts (Fig.5).

Following a decade of considerable professional accomplishments, their personal situation took a turn for the worst in 1962. At the age of 76, Vincent suffered a stroke that caused partial paralysis, rendering it impossible for him to carry on a normal life. The impact of this illness on the family was immeasurable. Their home had to be modified to accommodate his limited mobility, and money became so scarce that one doctor was known to have been paid for his services in ancient Greek tetradrachms. It was at this critical stage that the future of the collection came to a crossroads. A series of strategic steps was taken in a very short time, primarily by Olga who was assisted by their son, Denis. In 1964, Jean des Gagniers, Professor of Archaeology at Université Laval was asked by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs of Québec to begin the process of evaluating parts of the collection for possible acquisition. It was probably around this time that most objects were returned from Valleyfield and another exhibition quickly mounted at the École Gérard-Filion in Chambly in 1965 (Fig.6). Curiously, there was no acknowledgement of the family in the accompanying catalogue (Belle-Isle, 1965).

By 1966, however, the Diniacopoulos name was receiving an unprecedented amount of attention. In January, the Musée du Québec accepted their offer of donation of a nineteenth-century Canadian painting and soon after the couple completed for them the restoration of an alleged Piero della Francesca work. By June, the museum was exhibiting the Greek and Near-Eastern pieces from the collection. In its one-month run, nearly thirty thousand people visited the show. Even with her husband gravely ill, the Madame provided a lucid, introductory note to

the exhibition. In December, the Québec City museum presented for three months, "Icônes Byzantines". This second selection of works from the collection attracted eleven thousand visitors.

In 1967, the momentous year of the Montreal World's Fair, Vincent died. That spring, his son, Denis, wrote to the Director of the Musée du Québec: "Je profite de cette occasion pour vous dire de nouveau, combien ma famille a toujours désiré que ces objets soient exposés en permanence dans un musée de notre Province". Denis and his mother were probably unaware that some months prior, Prof. des Gagniers had already submitted his evaluation to the ministry. Providing complete inventory lists and art market comparisons, he stated that while the Egyptian and Middle Eastern portions were extremely attractive, the asking prices were far too elevated. Des Gagniers recommended that the government solely purchase the Greek segment. He reasoned that it would be the best decision owing to the quality of the vases, the socio-cultural affinities of Greece to Québec, the ease in making a homogeneous collection from the select objects, and how their acquisition would greatly assist in the study of Classical Archaeology at Université Laval. In 1968 seventy-two pieces were purchased from the Diniacopoulos family for one hundred thousand dollars.

Due in part to the persuasive efforts of Prof. des Gagniers, the grouping was soon after deposited at Laval. From 1968 to 1986, access was restricted to researchers, but from 1986 to 1999 many of the artefacts were displayed in a "Centre muséologique". It seems somewhat ironic that in 1999, the year that the Université Laval museum was closed due to budgetary cutbacks, the remaining works from the family collection were consigned to international auction by Olga Diniacopoulos, with a portion of the proceeds slated to benefit Concordia University. The antiquities community could not hide its enthusiasm for the opportunity to own items with such a solid provenance. Prices realised for most pieces well exceeded their high estimates, in many cases by ten times. It was altogether unfortunate that some of the Canadian museums that were privately offered segments of the family collection just prior to auction did not accept. After having seen similar offers declined five decades earlier, the ninety-two year old matriarch was not surprised.

The Madame once said that there remained many valuable things to be uncovered across the globe, but you need the wisdom to find them (Bieler, 1954). Knowing her, there probably remains more Diniacopoulos treasure stashed somewhere. Until the moment of its (re)discovery, the university and museum communities will have time to focus on the Mediterranean antiquities housed in Québec as well as the extraordinary number of works dispersed to private and public collections worldwide. The story of the Diniacopoulos family and their collection will become a timeless classic, even if the requisite film remains in the offing.

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