



The Mystery of the Portland Vase

Robin Brooks

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In 1845 a young man from Dublin who had been, under his own admission, "indulging in intemperance the week before" walked into the British Museum and headed for Room Ten where the Portland Vase sat on a pedestal under a thick, glass case. He waited until the attendant, who was responsible for two rooms, had strolled next door, then he picked up a handy lump of basalt - a fragment of a monument from the ancient city of Persepolis - and hurled it at the glass case. The vase that had survived nearly 2000 years was smashed into 200 pieces. Painstakingly reconstructed and now back on display as one of the British Museum's most treasured objects, the Portland Vase enjoys a fascinating story. It has passed through the hands of a remarkable cast of characters - rich and poor, titled and plebeian, famous and obscure. Among its owners were Flaminio Vacca (the tomb robber, cum budding archaeologist), the Princess of Palestrina (the notorious gambling addict), Sir William Hamilton (the famous cuckold), Josiah Wedgwood (genius of ceramics) and Horace Walpole (wit and dilettante). The Duchess of Portland dropped it but it didn't break. Robin Brooks recreates the lengthy travels and the powerful influence of this unique piece of art, which has long been an inspiration for artists, poets and historians, together with engaging portraits of the eccentric individuals through whose hands it has passed.

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