In 1850, Anselm von Rothschild (1803-1874) moved to Vienna to take over the running of the family-owned banking house S. M. von Rothschild. In the following years, he was to make his name in the capital city of the Austrian monarchy not only as a financier, but also as an art-collector: he laid the foundation for the significant art collections of the Viennese Rothschilds, which were extended and improved continuously right through until 1938.

Earlier, while living in Frankfurt, the Baron had begun to devote his attention to art. An important assistant in building up his collection was the Jewish artist Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, who had already served Anselm’s uncles in Naples and Paris. While Oppenheim was originally appointed as art tutor to Anselm’s wife, Charlotte (1807-1859), he quickly progressed to become the Baron’s art advisor and family portraitist.

Anselm von Rothschild was a great lover of miniatures and miniature craft objects: “The older I get and the greyer I get, the more I love these delightful miniature objects with their uncomplicated pleasures.” Oppenheim, who did not share his master’s preferences in the least, continually attempted to persuade the Baron to buy oil paintings, which in his opinion were the only true art – although initially with absolutely no success. He had better luck once the family moved into a new town-house at Neue Mainzer Straße 45 in Frankfurt. At this point, Anselm von Rothschild was receptive to Oppenheim’s recommendation to buy the art collection of the deceased Dutch businessman, Klerk de Reuss, to decorate the walls of his new home. He acquired the entire collection in 1842, at a price of 100,000 gulden. These 32 paintings served later as a practical illustration of the world of art for Anselm’s children. At a stroke, the Baron had acquired important works from the Dutch School, with paintings by Wouverman, Teniers, van Ostade and Cuyp.

Interest in works by the 17th-century Dutch School was to weave its way like a leitmotif through the collections over the following generations as well.

When Anselm moved to live in Austria, these paintings were newly accommodated in the rooms of his Palais in the Renngasse. While some works graced the walls of the red and green rooms, the majority of the paintings were housed in the so-called ‘Gemäldesaal’ or ‘Museum’. This room adjoined the Baron’s bedchambers which, furnished in Spartan style, contrasted with the impressive splendour found elsewhere in the Palace. The gallery was built especially for Anselm von Rothschild by the architect Flohr. It was lit from above – a rarity for private galleries of the time.

The Baron had led a lively social life in Germany. Both his home in Frankfurt and his country seat, the ‘Grüneburg’, had always been open to guests and the family were welcome invitees at the city’s social events. In Austria, however, his
social outings were noticeably less frequent. Anselm dedicated his energies to the banking house, spending his free hours smoking cigars as he viewed his collections. In these, his miniature craft objects continued to have pride of place: Franz Schestag, who in 1866 drew up his first catalogue of the collections of Anselm von Rothschild, lists a total of 452 individual items. These included ivory sculptures, medals, works by goldsmiths, wood-carvings, glass vessels, small boxes and manuscripts. These were supplemented by several miniatures, but oil paintings did not appear in the catalogue. Most of the small art objects probably came from the collection of his grandfather, Mayer Amschel, who even in his youth had started to collect coins and precious stones. When Schestag published a second edition of the catalogue in 1872, an additional 127 items had been added to the collection.

Ferdinand, Anselm’s second son, would occasionally criticise his father’s preference for the “lesser” arts. In his opinion, he had failed to take advantage of the possibilities which the art market had to offer at the time, and only in the rarest of instances had he followed up leads provided by relatives. With regard to the collections of paintings, his son’s criticism was to some degree justified. It should not be forgotten, however, that the record of Anselm’s estate at the time of his death in 1874 nevertheless lists 116 oil paintings, all impressive in their quality. Amongst these works, there were a total of 91 paintings by Dutch masters. Given that Dutch artists were represented neither in the Imperial Collection nor in other private collections in Vienna and enjoyed no great appreciation amongst the art-lovers of the time, these were not works collected with a view to establishing credentials in art circles. Anselm’s interest in a foreign School, from a country where the collector had never lived nor with which he had a particular affinity, remains surprising. Within Dutch painting, he was particularly taken with the genre paintings and landscapes. But the Baron also laid the foundations of a collection of paintings by Frans Hals, whose outstanding portrait of Tieleman Roosterman he had acquired at auction in 1872 for 15,200 florins from the Plach auction house. In the decade prior to his death, he became a more active collector of paintings. His son Ferdinand attributed this to his increased ambition to outdo his competitors. In fact, he engaged in bidding at international auctions, acquiring 13 paintings of the French School and portraits of the English School. Astonishingly, his collections also reveal seven works of Italian Schools, of which four are representations of the Madonna. This interest in Christian images may seem surprising in a Jewish collector, but it is said of the Baron that in his later years he developed an interest in Catholicism, which could be the reason behind these purchases.

Anselm did not confine his buying to works acquired simply for his own pleasure. He also committed himself to supporting and acquiring works for public museums. Following his own personal preferences, he showed a special interest in craft items and was a member of the Society for the Promotion of Applied Art (Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Angewandten Kunst). After Anselm’s death in 1874, his sons Albert and Nathaniel von Rothschild significantly expanded their father’s art collection and gave the works a prestigious setting by building two Palais in the Fourth District of Vienna. These grand houses were taken on by Albert’s sons, Louis and Alphonse, who further enhanced the collections but also extended the range by purchasing works by 19th-century Austrian painters. As a result of this extensive collecting by his descendants, Anselm’s rôle as the founder of the

Wooded evening landscape with hunter and dogs, by Jan Wynants and Adriaen van de Velde, c.1670. It once hung in Anselm’s ‘Gemäldesaal’ in the Renngasse. (by courtesy of Christie’s)
collection has, perhaps, been overshadowed. While Salomon von Rothschild, his father and the founder of the Vienna banking house, had needed to devote his entire energies to building up the bank and to integrating into Viennese society, it was Anselm who was able, on the back of these achievements, to spend time in pursuit of other, non-business interests and in so doing not only to found but, by example, to encourage his children to develop one of the great Austrian collections.

**SOURCES**


**NOTES**

1. Anselm von Rothschild had already been managing the Vienna branch of the bank since 1846, the year in which his father Salomon had left the city in the wake of the political upheavals. See Morton, Frederick, Der Rothschild. Portrait einer Dynastie, Vienna 1981, pp. 294–296. After he moved permanently to the Austrian capital in 1859, he co-founded the Österreichische Kreditanstalt für Handel und Gewerbe [Austrian Loan Corporation for Commerce and Trade] in 1855.

2. From the 1880s until the family were moved permanently to the Austrian capital in 1859, he co-founded the Österreichische Kreditanstalt für Handel und Gewerbe [Austrian Loan Corporation for Commerce and Trade] in 1855.

3. Moritz Oppenheim himself, an art router and these documents, published by his son, are the most important instance of art to come to the art world in Vienna during this period. Oppenheim, Moritz, Erinnerungen. Published by Alfred Oppenheim, Frankfurt am Main 1924. In his capacity as art router, Oppenheim was a visitor to many artistically-minded households. As a result, he learned at first hand what items were for sale, and in some instances was able to persuade the owner to come commit to works to Baron Rothschild.

4. In his capacity as art tutor, Oppenheim himself, an art router and these documents, published by his son, are the most important instance of art to come to the art world in Vienna during this period. Oppenheim, Moritz, Erinnerungen. Published by Alfred Oppenheim, Frankfurt am Main 1924. In his capacity as art router, Oppenheim was a visitor to many artistically-minded households. As a result, he learned at first hand what items were for sale, and in some instances was able to persuade the owner to come commit to works to Baron Rothschild.


6. The country house is given various names in the literature, in some instances ‘Greensburg’ and in some instances ‘Greentown’.

7. See Sources, 2.

8. Ferdinand von Rothschild (1839-1908) moved from Austria to England in 1908, after he had spent the rest of his life, having married English cousin, Evclina, in 1855. After her death, he built Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire and filled it with immense art collections which can still be seen today under the ownership of the National Trust. Among his collected, he inherited about 50 pieces – mostly craft objects – from his father Anselm in 1874. Among his inheritances were also a few paintings. ‘Hunters resting in front of a tavern’ by van Calraet, (28.5 x 22.2 cm, inventory number W 2/19/6*). Both of these pictures have been returned to the collections of his descendants.

9. See Sources, 2.

10. 40 percent in total.

11. 29 percent in total.

12. Inventory number AR 666. Franz Hils, oil on canvas 117 x 87 cm. Signed and dated ‘Aeux Strass 1861’.

13. Since Moritz Oppenheim remained in Germany when Anselm moved to Austria, the Baron looked for new advisors in Vienna. The main person who served him in that capacity was the dealer and auctioneer Gustav Plach.

14. Mainly works from the 18th century. Probably under the influence of his wife Charlotte, for whom he had arranged to have a room at the Gründerzeit country house decorated in the manner of Louis XV.

15. See the letter regarding his acceptance of his son Ferdinand and by him to his brother Albert. (by courtesy of Christie’s)