

Mayer Carl von Rothschild: collector or patriot?

Philippa Glanville explores the relationship between politics and art in one of the great Rothschild collections



Mayer Carl von
Rothschild
(1820-1886)

A rococo gold-mounted jug in Lisbon, a massive Neo-Gothic horn in London, a silver plaque chased with Christ's Baptism at the V&A, a double cup by Hans Petzolt, a towering Renaissance centrepiece in Amsterdam: all are striking examples of Continental goldsmiths' work, linked today by their 19th-century owner.

Mayer Carl von Rothschild, or Charles as his English relatives called him, was born in 1820, the eldest son of another Charles, Carl Mayer (1788-1855), the fourth of the Five Arrows, the five sons of Mayer Amschel of Frankfurt. His mother was Adelheid Herz, daughter of a Hamburg merchant, his wife Louise (1820-1894) was a London Rothschild, daughter of Nathan, the founder of the London bank. He enrolled at Göttingen university and heard Ranke's lectures on German history in Berlin, before serving a banking apprenticeship in London and Frankfurt. From the late 1830s he worked in the Frankfurt bank, experiencing political disturbances in 1848 and the threat of a Prussian invasion in 1866.¹

Mayer Carl von Rothschild's collection of almost five thousand works of art was set out in his Frankfurt house on the Untermainquai and his villa at the Gunthersburg, outside the town. German plate stood out among the Limoges enamels, gold boxes from Paris, Dresden and Vienna

and Italian hardstone cabinets. All were catalogued by the Frankfurt art historian Ferdinand Luthmer in the early 1880s. Mayer Carl's name recurs as an outstanding figure, even within a family of collectors. However, little is known about how and why he collected, and how much, apart from the cameos and portraits by Moritz Oppenheim, was inherited from his father Carl Mayer.²

Luthmer gave few objects any provenance, although lists made after Mayer Carl's death in 1886 refer to the London sale of the Duke of Hamilton's collection in 1882. Mayer Carl's star acquisition was the well-known Mother Earth table centre (Merkelsche Aufsatz), bought privately in 1880 (see p39). This extraordinary confection of silver gilt and enamel, commissioned from Wenzel Jamnitzer in 1548-9, a metre tall and bristling with foliage and flowers, was widely admired in 19th-century Germany. Its price to Mayer Carl was exceptionally high: "Man spricht von 800,000 Mark", whereas the new museum in Berlin had paid 666,000 marks for thirty-six items from the Luneburg civic plate in 1874. The German state was rumoured to be trying to buy the Jamnitzer piece in 1895, after the death of Mayer Carl's widow.³

In the European art market of Mayer Carl's youth, collectors took advantage of the upheavals of recent history to pick over "the remnants of ancient wealth and grandeur... some ten years after the tranquillisation of Europe, distracted by the long war of the French revolution ... Art-Treasures had been dispersed and gradually fell into the hands of dealers." As long-established institutions across Europe sold their possessions, at least three of the Five Arrows collected, particularly showy "curiosities" of goldsmiths' work such as Mayer Carl's shield-hung cup of a Weavers Guild. In 1807 D.V. Denon had seized for the Musée Napoléon in Paris striking German plate from the treasury at Hesse-Kassel. Richly worked old Portuguese and German buffet plate attracted William Beckford and the Dukes of Sussex, Cambridge and York. Garrards sold "old Nuremburg" silver, for dressing historicist interiors, to the Duke of Buccleuch.⁴

The King of Saxony decided to reorganise his Kunstkammer in 1832. An auction of clocks and automata from his famous Dresden collections followed in 1835, the likely source of several Rothschild figures and automata. Although we cannot say what he first bought and when, dealers



Cup in the form of a cat, silver, Augsburg, c.1600 (Château Mouton Rothschild)

were the essential intermediaries. In July 1842, two generations of male Rothschilds, Anthony (the second son of Nathan), Mayer Carl, Carl Mayer and Nathaniel called on the leading Nuremberg dealers, the house of Abraham, Siegmund and Max Pickert, the first of many contacts.⁵

His father Carl's residence in Naples from 1821 presumably explains his cameos and intaglios, untypical of later Rothschild taste. Mayer Carl, however, sought out early German metalwork, particularly animal form, ivory-mounted, rare or richly chased pieces. He shared this taste with Lionel and Mayer in London well after the 1850s when it was becoming unfashionable.⁶

Glittering and reflecting the light, in fanciful shapes, embodying wealth, goldsmiths' work exudes continuity and tradition. Massive buffets for old gilt plate featured at Carlton House in the Prince Regent's Gothic Dining Room, at Burghley and in Hardwick's Livery Hall at Goldsmiths' Hall. So for the Rothschilds to create spectacular buffets, as at Mentmore, where a four-tier buffet ran the length of the dining room to deploy their gilt plate to best effect, was following this fashion. The Mentmore shelves were covered in figured velvet to match the wall-covering and "large cups, a big round dish, an owl and an equestrian figure" stood on side tables, reflected in mirrors.⁷ Mayer Carl bought costly German objects at least till 1880. As the art critic Rudolf von Eitelburg commented in 1876, "they did not bear any foreign character". In this way he was identifying with the new Germany and distancing himself from his relatives' prevailing French taste amid the nationalistic and aggressive Franco-German relations of the 1860s and 1870s. By 1860 he was Court Banker for Prussia, and was preoccupied with delicate financial negotiations with Bismarck.

When Frankfurt was threatened by a Prussian invasion in July 1866, the Gunthersburg was in the line of advance. 180 soldiers were quartered on the family; it was "lucky that the cows were not yet in their new stable, for it makes a capital barracks", his wife wrote to her cousins in London, reassuring them that Charles was perfectly calm, although it was rumoured that he might be imprisoned. In fact, his relationship with Prussia became crucial with the enormous indemnity subsequently demanded from Frankfurt by the Prussians. His key rôle, assisted by generous contributions to a new city hospital, led to his almost unanimous election to the parliament of the North German Federation in 1867.⁸

Was Mayer's appetite for German decorative arts stimulated by his rôle as negotiator for Frankfurt's interests? Apart from Meissen porcelain, his houses contained medieval horns, spectacular Mannerist silver by the Jamnitzer family and the Lencker brothers, Gothic-revival double cups by Hans Petzolt, high-relief plaques by the Augsburg chaser Thelott, and Dinglinger "toys", mounted rhinoceros, tortoiseshell, "unicorn" and mother of pearl from other German workshops.⁹

Visiting his Frankfurt cousins, Ferdinand wrote to Lionel on 13 September 1874, "I had not much time to look at the curiosities as Baron Charles was hungry... I cared less for his new purchases than for his former ones, which as you will remember are very fine." His doubts were well founded as far as some of the Renaissance jewels and early mounted objects were concerned. By the time of the first sale of his objects, in Paris just before the First World War, tastes had changed and some of Mayer Carl's pieces made far less than might have been anticipated twenty-five years earlier when his massive estate was divided.¹⁰

His Untermainquai house, a neoclassical structure of 1820/1 purchased in 1846, was almost doubled in length in a four-year campaign, to designs by Frederic Rumpf. His wife Louise wrote in July 1850, "our house is still very little advanced", and a year later in September, "The house is not yet finished and work people are still hovering about ... some of the rooms are as comfortable as I can wish them to be." Guests entered through a marble-lined entrance hall. The first-floor panelled blue Smoking Room and the white and gold Louis XVI Salon are now incorporated into the Frankfurt Jewish Museum which occupies the building. The walls were hung with family portraits, but apart

'Der Merkelsche
Tafelaufsatz'
by Wenzel
Jamnitzer, one of
the major pieces
in Mayer Carl's
collection, now in
the Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam
(BK-17040)



Plaque depicting
the Baptism of
Christ, embossed
and chased by
Johann Andreas
Thelott,
Augsburg,
1685, probably
made for a
house altar
(V&A,M470-1956)



from a Tischbein depicting the much-admired German, Goethe, in Rome, he had little interest in 19th-century paintings. Louise had her private picture gallery upstairs, a sitting room hung with portraits of her family by Mrs Robertson.¹¹

His wife's letters depict Mayer Carl as an absent figure, constantly travelling on business, for example to Constantinople to negotiate with the Sultan in 1847. Accustomed to the hospitality and assimilated atmosphere of her London home, she found the straitlaced life of her observant Frankfurt parents-in-law inimical. Until 1848, the restrictions on the civil liberties of the Jews in Frankfurt, even if less onerous than those of Prussia or Saxony, constrained their social activities. In July 1852 she was gloomy about "we poor Jews" and liberal principles: "Here they are retrograding as fast as possible". Four months later, "what a wretched place this is, how full of meanness and littleness, how totally devoid of all that ennobles the heart or enlightens the mind". "Charles resolutely refuses ever to leave his fireside and cigar in the evenings", she wrote after ten years of marriage, although they attended a series of evening lectures on German history together in 1857. "I own with a blush that they make me feel rather sleepy".¹²

In contrast, in 1860s London, easy social relations between Sir Henry Cole, director of the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A), and the English Rothschilds led to weekends at Mentmore, advice to Sir Anthony on the design of gates for Aston Clinton, and extensive loans from Lionel, Mayer and Anthony for a glamorous exhibition in 1862. But in Frankfurt the cultural atmosphere was much less open. Mayer Carl's preference for privacy may have played a part. Perhaps to play down speculation about his wealth, he refused to lend to a city exhibition, to Ferdinand's surprise, although Anselm in Vienna published a catalogue and lent to the newly established Museum für angewandte Kunst.¹³

Mayer Carl's Untermainquai house, as with Rothschild houses in Paris and London, set out decorative art in picturesque juxtapositions. More fragile or precious pieces were in showcases, following the practice of early collectors of "curiosities" in France and England.¹⁴

A showcase of old plate appears in the 1838 Frankfurt family portrait of Mayer's cousin, Anselm. In the early 1840s his father Salomon set up a cabinet of curiosities in his new country house at Schillersdorf in Silesia, as Ferdinand and his brothers were to do in their respective houses. At Waddesdon, Ferdinand first set up a private *salle des curiosités* in the Tower Room, creating his famous Smoking Room only in the 1890s. A large vitrine in the Red Drawing Room of his London house, 143 Piccadilly, contained £50,000-worth of *objets d'art*.¹⁵

However, Mayer Carl took a significant step beyond these two forms of display. Much of his old German gilded plate was set out formally in free-standing cases in three "museum rooms" at the Untermainquai residence, open to the public and described in a long newspaper article in 1890. These "museum rooms", facing the garden, grouped objects broadly by materials. Large free-standing porcelain jars brought colour and bulk to contrast with the rectangular and heavy wooden-framed cases. There were no labels, and no printed catalogue, which, along with its restricted weekly opening hours, three in winter and six in summer, was the explanation offered in 1890 for its being so rarely visited. Ferdie's comment that "the cups and groups are crowded together in large glass cases and it is almost impossible to see them" suggests that it lacked a sense of happy placement.¹⁶

Mayer Carl died in 1886 leaving a widow and six daughters. His will echoes his father's in differentiating his personal collections as distinct from family records, decorations and heirlooms. In a lengthy codicil of 1854, Carl Mayer had specified as heirlooms for Mayer Carl his "ancient coins and modern medals in my iron chest" and his collection of cameos, while his antique time-pieces and snuff boxes should be divided by lot. In the 1880s, his son specified that his daughter Hannah Louise was to receive her grandfather's "old coins, new medals and numismatic books." But his main collection was divided by Luthmer and five executors between the widow and three daughters. "Silver from Germany" is the phrase used fifty years later in 1935 in Emma, Lady Rothschild's inventories (she was the second daughter), to distinguish the separate bequest from her father. His decorations and orders, displayed prominently by his eldest daughter, Adèle, in her rue Berryer reception room in Paris, are in a table case beneath the extraordinary foursquare St. Hubert Tazza (created by Vasters in the 1870s), recalling a glorious German past, both personal and artistic.¹⁷

From pride in his faith and his family, he excluded his daughter Margarethe from all but her legal obligatory portion of his estate, because she had married a Frenchman, the Duc de Guiche (later Duc de Gramont) in 1878, the year that Hannah, Mayer's daughter at Mentmore, "married out", to the Earl of Rosebery. "He objects to a Catholic, he objects to a Frenchman, he objects to a widower, he objects to a moderate fortune.... excepting a Rothschild, he would object to any living man." Lacking a son, he left his inherited family portraits to Adèle, the eldest, who had married Salomon James, son of the great Baron James and Betty, and moved to Paris; and to Hannah Louise, who stayed at home, his father's "old coins, new medals and numismatic books", plus his own decorations and orders. His art works were split between his widow and three of the daughters.¹⁸

His daughters Adèle and Emma showed their inherited collections in rooms of entertainment. In Paris, Adèle devised a *salle des curiosités* opening off the Smoking Room. Her double-height central hall was dressed with trophies of arms and two wall-cases containing Venetian glass and Limoges enamels, flanked by wall-mounted dishes of maiolica, a technique adopted for her father's large gilt dishes in the main first-floor Salon.

At Tring the showcases were recessed into panelling and the objects arranged singly for maximum dramatic impact, whereas Adèle in Paris preferred a crowded and rich effect. Her French 18th-century furniture was overlooked by a massive and unornamented showcase, some five metres long, crammed with

Two interior views of rue Berryer showing the St Hubert Tazza (left) and the massive display cases (right)



more than a hundred examples of goldsmiths' work. Medieval and Renaissance vessels were flanked by four shelves of paired nautilus shells, carved ivory, tankards and pear and gourd cups, with Vincennes porcelain flower groups above and Sèvres vases and clocks on the base. Smaller cases flanked the doorways. Elsewhere, table-cases stood between the sofas and armchairs, filled with boxes, *nécessaires* and other "toys".¹⁹

For Mayer Carl, his German plate evoked the proud histories of the cities of the Holy Roman Empire. The Renaissance was seen as a national art movement. The Free City of Frankfurt, the place of crowning of the Holy Roman Emperor, and the city chosen for the abortive meeting of the German princes in 1863, resonated with both historical and contemporary significance. His ambition was to bring together the best that the market could yield of this national treasure. In this he succeeded magnificently. When the collection was reviewed in 1890, the comparison was with nothing less than the German goldsmiths' work in the princely treasuries of Dresden, Munich, Hesse-Kassel, Vienna and Moscow.



Detail of the table centrepiece by Wenzel Jamnitzer from *Der Schatz des Freiherrn Karl von Rothschild, Meisterwerke alter Goldschmiedekunst*, edited by Ferdinand Luthmer 1883

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NOTES

1. My warm thanks to the staff of The Rothschild Archive for sharing sources, particularly the letters of Louise von Rothschild and testamentary documents for Carl Mayer and Mayer Carl von Rothschild. N.Ferguson: *The World's Banker*, London 1998, passim; G.Heuberger (ed.): *The Rothschilds: A European Family*, Frankfurt Jewish Museum 1994, pp.179-181. Frankfurt was turbulent in the 1830s and 1840s, with "hep-hep" anti-Jewish riots in 1830 and 1834 and occupation by German Confederation troops from 1833 until 1842. *British Envoys to Germany*, Camden Soc. 5th series, vol.21 (2002), e.g. (p.51) Cartwright to Palmerston, 7 May 1833: "Mr Rothschild and a dozen or so of the chief bankers and merchants.....so alarmed by the cry of an approaching Revolution and general pillage".
2. F.Luthmer: *Der Schatz des Freiherrn Karl von Rothschild, Meisterwerke alter Goldsmiedekunst aus dem 14-18 Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt-am-Main 1885. For example, objects from his collection are in the Ashmolean Museum, Germanisches National Museum, Schroder Collection, Bayerisches National Museum and elsewhere. Ten items of metalwork are in the European Department, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. A Gothic revival double cup by Petzolt (Luthmer, pl. 47) was sold at Christie's London, 11 June 2003. Cameos and boxes were sold at Sothebys London, 12 Dec 2003, lots 1-13, 42-44. The Smoking Room at Waddesdon epitomises his taste: *Waddesdon Companion Guide*, 2003, pp100-107.
3. The Rothschild exhibition in 2008, curated by Kathy Hiesinger of the Philadelphia Museum, will assess collecting by the Five Arrows, so far the least-documented Rothschild generation. Ferdinand de Rothschild cited some provenances for the Smoking Room "curiosities", essentially his bequest to the British Museum (Waddesdon Archive). The Paris-mounted jug, after a design by F. Boucher, was bought by the dealer Wertheimer at the Hamilton Palace sale: "Only the Best": Masterpieces of the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1999, no.52; M.Hall: "The English Rothschilds as Collectors" in *The Rothschilds: A European family* (op.cit). For discussion of the 19th-century significance of the Jamnitzer centrepiece, now in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, see Wenzel Jamnitzer, *Germanisches National Museum*, Nuremberg 1995, pp.192-7. Ferguson converts the figure to £32,000, p.362. *Guide to Berlin Museums*, n.d.(c1990) pp.172-3; German newspaper cutting, 1895 (part of microfilm in The Rothschild Archive of a collection in the Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek, Frankfurt: RAL 000/838).
4. *Art Journal* 1856, cited in C. Wainwright: *The Romantic Interior: The British Collector at Home 1750 to 1850*, London 1989, p.293; S.Herman & J.Pascal, *Mouton Rothschild: The Museum of Wine in Art*, Paris 2003, p.157; *Die Silberkammer der Landgrafen von Hessen-Kassel*, Staatliches Museum Kassel, 2003, p.20; P.Glanville: "Boughton silver" in T.Murdoch (ed.): *Boughton House, The English Versailles*, London 1992.
5. J.Schardin: "History of the Horological Collections in Dresden" in *Antiquarian Horology*, Autumn 1991, vol.19, no.5, p.503; automata with a Rothschild provenance include: H.Tait: *The Waddesdon Bequest*, vol.2, 1988, p.260; Neptune on a turtle, sold Sothebys London, 26 April 1937, lot 164 (Victor Rothschild sale); and two *Buttenmänner*, Mouton Rothschild (one from Mayer Carl's collection, unpublished Mouton inventory), op. cit. p.63. My thanks to Norbert Jopek, Senior Sculpture Curator, V&A, who is preparing a full analysis of the Pickert 1832-1900 visitors book, to be published in the *Anzeiger der Germanischen Nationalmuseums*.
6. C.Davis: *A Description of the Works of Art...of Alfred de Rothschild*, vol 2, *Sèvres China. Furniture, Metalwork and Objets de Vitrine*, London 1884 and E.A Jones: *Catalogue of the Old Plate of Leopold de Rothschild*, London 1907; *Earl of Rosebery sale*, Sothebys London, 11 February 1999.
7. *Tafelzeremoniell in Europa 1300-1900*, Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin 2003, "Kredenz und Buffet" pp.143-7; P.Glanville, *Silver in England*, London 1987, pl.113, 114; Wainwright, op.cit., pl.253; P. Prévost-Marcilhacy: *Les Rothschild, bâtisseurs et mécènes*, Paris 1995, p.116. My thanks to Lady Rosebery for sharing memories of Mentmore, including "the Siamese cat delicately threading its way between cups, plates and figures" on the buffet shelves.
8. Cited in Wenzel Jamnitzer catalogue, op.cit., p.198; Ferguson, op.cit., pp.634-5.
9. Luthmer op.cit., passim; *Waddesdon Companion Guide* 2003, p.103.
10. Ferdinand's letters, The Rothschild Archive (RAL) 000/26; designs for Reinhold Vasters of Aachen's neo-Gothic horn and St. Hubert Tazza are at the V&A, see C.Truman: "Reinhold Vasters, 'the last of the goldsmiths?'" in *Connoisseur*, March 1979, p.161; Y.Hackenbroch: "Reinhold Vasters, Goldsmith" in *Metropolitan Museum of Art Journal*, vol. 19/20, 1984/5, passim; 'Les moulages...du restaurateur Alfred Andre (1839-1919)' in A.Kugel: *Joyaux Renaissance, une splendeur retrouvée*, Paris 2000, unpaginated; *Galerie Georg Petit*, Paris 12-13 June 1911, *Orfèverie Allemande Pierre Dures Montis* provenant de L'ancienne collection de Feu M. le Baron Carl Meyer de Rothschild (de Francfort).
11. P.Prévost-Marcilhacy, op.cit., pp.303-5. A photograph of her Green Salon around 1880 is reproduced as p.33, R.Burgard et al.: *Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt am Main*, Frankfurt, 1989.
12. Letters from Louise, 1841 to 1879, The Rothschild Archive, RAL000/41/1: 1 Dec 1857.
13. Sir Henry Cole's diaries are in the National Art Library, V&A (my thanks to Elizabeth Bonython for sharing her references to the Rothschilds); A.Burton: *Vision and Accident, The Story of the Victoria & Albert Museum*, London 1999, pp.66-7; seven Rothschilds lent to the Art Wealth of England exhibition; Ferdinand's letter to Lionel, The Rothschild Archive, RAL 000/26; Dr F.Kunth: "Anselm von Rothschild, collector" in *Rothschild Archive Review* 2001/2, pp.37-41; F.Schestag: *Kunstsammlung des Freiherrn Anselm von Rothschild in Wien*, Vienna 1866.
14. Prévost-Marcilhacy, op.cit., pp.223-6; Wainwright, op.cit. pp.121-4 and passim; M.Baker & B.Richardson: *A Grand Design*, Abrams/Baltimore Museum of Art 1997, pp.30-1
15. Prévost-Marcilhacy, op.cit. pp.251-3; M. Hall: *Waddesdon Manor*, Abrams 2002, p.138; 1890 Alliance Insurance policy on Waddesdon at The Rothschild Archive, RAL 000/110.
16. *Intelligenz Blatt der Stadt Frankfurt a.M.*, Sunday 16 March 1890 (microfilm in The Rothschild Archive of a collection in the Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek, Frankfurt: RAL 000/838); Ferdinand letter to Lionel, 13 September 1874, The Rothschild Archive, RAL 000/26.
17. The Rothschild Archive holds the English codicil to Carl Mayer's will, 1854, RAL 000/105, and inventories of the Piccadilly and Tring houses taken on the death of Emma, Lady Rothschild, 1935, RAL 000/848.
18. Letters of Louise, 26 June and 21 July 1878; typescript analysis of his testamentary intentions, The Rothschild Archive, RAL 000/41.
19. Prévost-Marcilhacy, op.cit. p.229; *Waddesdon Archive: inventory taken by C.Davis after Ferdinand's death*, 1898