A family portrait

Michael Hall explores the history of a painting that is familiar to generations of staff and visitors at New Court

The Rothschild Archive is custodian of a large number and variety of works of art associated with the history of the Rothschild family and bank, besides the documentary archive. Visitors to the head office of N M Rothschild & Sons at New Court in St Swithin’s Lane in the City of London are directed to the waiting area at one side of the entrance hall under the monumental group portrait of 1821 of the founder and his family by William Armfield Hobday (1777–1831).¹ N.M. Rothschild, his wife Hannah and their children Charlotte, Lionel, Anthony, Nathaniel, Hannah Mayer, Mayer Amschel and baby Louise are accompanied by a friendly but sadly unnamed Newfoundland dog in an idyllic and probably imaginary setting of classical architecture, drapery and leafy backdrop with a distant bridge.² N.M., seated on the left with his youngest son Mayer Amschel at his knee, looks firmly, proprietorially but proudly at his family, meeting directly the gaze of his eldest son Lionel, who, with his two brothers, is clearly intending to leave the scene to play with the dog. The composition is not without merit in that the interaction of the three groupings – N.M. and his son to the left, his wife and daughters in the centre and his other sons and dog to the right – appear to relate each to the other and within themselves, a united and spirited family, while only the youngest children, innocence personified, look out directly to the viewer, as innocents should.

However, there are deeper and more reflective aspects to this picture: that of the artist and his rôle as portraitist, in the composition itself, but most interestingly in the circumstances of the commission, its timing and inspiration. First, the artist: William Armfield Hobday was a surprising choice for one of the City’s leading and wealthier bankers to make for the portrait of his family, leaving aside for the moment the question of N.M.’s interest, or lack of it, in art and portraiture. Hobday, the son of a wealthy spoon manufacturer from Birmingham, had what could hardly have been called a glittering career as an artist, though his lavish lifestyle, subsidised by his father, had brought him into affluent and influential circles.³ Sent to study painting in London in 1786, he entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1790 alongside the Irish artist Martin Archer Shee (1769–1850), who rose to be President of the Royal Academy and honoured with knighthood. Hobday never achieved such distinction, becoming a prolific but uninspired

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The Rothschild family portrait in the reception area of New Court shortly after the building was opened in 1965.
The family of W. N. Rothschild (sic), Consul General of His Austrian Majesty at the British Court, William Armfield Hobday.

portrait miniaturist, activity for which he is now best remembered, apart from the aberration of the Rothschild group.⁴ His painting style developed very much under the admittedly influential shadow of the first Academy President, Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792). He exhibited regularly at the Academy exhibitions from 1794 until 1830, though his sitters appear to be primarily the middle class, merchants and officers, with the occasional nobleman or high-ranking City figure.⁵

Painting miniatures was not notably financially rewarding in the early years of the eighteenth-century, unless you were particularly gifted – and Hobday was not – so in 1804 he removed himself to Bristol to take likenesses of officers of Wellington’s army departing for Portugal and Spain, where again he did not prosper, though there are admittedly few survivors of this trade from which to judge. By 1819 Hobday was back in London, living at Winchester House in Old Broad Street in the City, close to the Rothschilds’ home at New Court. The following year he moved to Pall Mall and to that address the Rothschild family must have gone, to his north-facing studio at No. 61, to be painted, probably in the spring of 1820 as the present work was exhibited at the Royal Academy in the summer exhibition which opened in late May of the following year.⁶ The commission must have been given soon after Hobday’s return to London from Bristol, indeed the portrait of Amschel Mayer von Rothschild (1773–1855)
This locket, containing a miniature of Anselm von Rothschild, the husband of Charlotte, is similar to the one she is featured wearing in the Hobday portrait.

The figure of Mayer Amschel, resting his arm on his father’s knee, seems darkly ill-defined, poorly painted or in poor condition, with much evidence of craquelure, thinning and little evidence of modelling of the flesh of the child’s arms, problems that run into the figure of N.M. himself, notably his right hand, which is poorly defined. The canvas, however, shows no sign of damage under the painted surface or on the selvage, nor any effect of fire or damp that could have damaged the paint. It is possible and indeed probable in the light of the good condition of the rest of the paint surface that Mayer Amschel was an addition, either into wet paint or wet varnish, when it was realised that there were insufficient bodies to account for the seven children. Hobday, being presented during the sittings with babies looking much alike, probably miscounted and needed to add a figure, rather unsatisfactorily, an addition which necessitated the alteration of N.M.’s pose. A closer technical examination may confirm this hypothesis, possibly when the picture is removed during the forthcoming rebuilding of New Court.

The pose N.M. adopted may have been worked out in advance, as a previously unattributed picture, on a much smaller scale, in the collection at New Court shows him in a similar posture, but with a more defined setting of drapery and sofa. Clearly also by Hobday, this work is most likely to have preceded the larger work and supports the theory of the added child, outlined above, in that N.M.’s left hand, holding a folded paper and resting on the arm of an elegant Regency-style sofa, was redrawn for the larger work to link father and son by lowering his hand.
to pass the paper to Mayer Amschel. The awkward gap than then emerged between husband and wife is now loosely filled with a shawl draped over the back of the sofa which bears no relationship to the line of the seat and all detail of the gilded front rail of that seat has been lost in the final version.

Hobday exhibited the work under the misspelt title *The family of W.N. Rothschild, Consul General of His Austrian Majesty at the British Court* at the Royal Academy, which gives some indication as to why N.M. may have chosen this moment to commission such a portrait. On 4 April 1820 N.M. was named Austrian consul in London, effectively the business and trade representative of the Austrian government in Britain, an official post that reflected the international standing of the Rothschild banking houses but also an important step towards social emancipation. But it begs the question as to why N.M. chose to be painted with his family at all. Apparently he was deeply disinterested in art in all its forms, complaining bitterly about John James Audubon’s attempts to sell him a copy of *Birds of America* – ‘What, a hundred pounds for birds!’ he exclaimed – and in 1833 baulked at buying a painting from the art dealer Julius David Herrman for £300, declaring he had to buy his sons ponies – ‘objects neither useful or profitable’ – though he did buy a picture from him for £30 as a present for somebody else.³ N.M., however, sat for his portrait from a number of artists, all of which are now in the care of The Rothschild Archive, including the Frenchman Louis-Amié Grosclaude, the Rothschild family’s German Jewish artist of preference Daniel Moritz Oppenheim and he commissioned William Beechey for a half-length portrait of his wife Hannah.¹⁰ The Hobday commission may also have had something to do with the Rothschild family’s change of residence from New Court to the ‘pretty villa’ in Stoke Newington in 1819, where we know N.M. hung the portraits of his grateful clients, the crowned heads of Europe, portraits that now hang at New Court.¹¹ Though it is not known where the massive Hobday and attendant Royalties hung during the later nineteenth century, they were at Gunnersbury by the early twentieth century, and taken to New Court when Gunnersbury was sold in 1925 and returned to New Court after the rebuilding in 1965.¹²

The monumental Hobday, with its monumental price, seems like an aberration which even N.M.’s new status as a quasi-diplomat and country gentleman cannot explain. However, as a
third aspect to fully understand the work in whose presence so many have kicked their heels we may find a more rational and understandable reason for its existence if one looks at the deep and long-standing rivalry that existed between the banking houses of Rothschild and Baring. In the same Royal Academy exhibition of May 1821 that Hobday exhibited his portrait of the Rothschild family, Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769–1830) President of the Royal Academy and by far-and-away the most distinguished and talented portraitist of the age, exhibited his Portrait of Mrs. Henry Baring and family. At first glance this large work bears only a passing resemblance to the Rothschild family group, the most noticeable similarity being the presence of a large dog actively engaged with young Master James Baring on the right of the scene, the whole posed in a classically inspired, columned and draped setting in a similar manner to Hobday, though this is a recognised convention of portraiture of the period, so therefore unremarkable. The attention of her daughter Anna-Maria to Mrs Baring’s hair forms a charming vignette, but the relationship between mother and son is barely formed, resting solely on her outstretched hand holding an open book that covers the foot of James as he wrestles with his pet, though his backward glance seems to ask for his mother’s attention, which is clearly elsewhere. As well it might be. Lawrence had begun this work several years before, in the winter of 1816. In February 1817, in conversation with his friend and exhaustive diarist Joseph Farington, he talked of this picture as ‘the portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Baring’ and his hope that it would be ready for the Academy show that year. But where is Mr Baring? Clearly Mrs Baring is looking directly at her husband, but by the time the famously lethargic and dilatory Lawrence had completed the picture Henry Baring had been cut off. The composition therefore may well have looked far more like the Rothschild group by Hobday, and certainly the size would have been comparable – even without Mr Baring the picture is nearly two meters square. Though The Englishman favourably reviewed the work – ‘a large family group, well-designed’ – if it is considered as only a partial composition and the ghostly figure of husband Henry is imagined to the left then it is far more understandable, in that Mrs. Baring would seem less distracted by her daughter and more attentive to her spouse. In 1830, after Lawrence’s death, his executors delivered to Henry Baring ‘a Port of Himself cut out of a larger picture’ but this is not known to have survived.

In contrast to the Rothschilds’ happy married life, that of the Henry Barings was famously turbulent. Maria-Matilda Bingham, daughter of an American industrialist and politician of Senatorial rank, married Henry Baring in 1802. Passionate, wayward, a brilliant gambler and a fine shot, Henry lived what his brother Alexander Baring described as ‘an anti-domestic life of great notoriety’, reflected in the removal of his figure from Lawrence’s portrait and confirmed by his divorce in 1824, though he went on to marry again and father a further eight children. Maria-Matilda was, by all accounts, no paragon of virtue either. It is tempting to think that Lawrence may have included the couple’s eldest son Henry in the 1817 composition, as at the age of 13 he would be expected to be depicted. The Barings, despite their marital troubles, went on to produce a third son, William, in 1822.

Lawrence’s portrait of Henry Baring’s father, Sir Francis Baring with his brother and son-in-law, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1807, is one of that artist’s iconic works, greatly admired at the time and a standard by which Lawrence’s works have been judged since. In 1810 Lawrence had exhibited a second Baring family portrait, this time of Sir Francis’s son Sir Thomas Baring with his son, his mother (posthumously), his sister and her son, which was also well received by the critics. Lawrence was charging between £300 and £500 for full-lengths and group portraits, so Hobday’s reputed fee could be seen as either excessive or desperate, or both. N.M., or those who noted such matters in the Rothschild family circle of friends, would thus have been well aware of the Baring family iconography promoted by Sir Thomas Lawrence and may have
known about the forthcoming Henry Baring family portrait, not least because it remained for so many years unfinished in the artist’s studio at his home in Russell Square. We know, from a drawing of 1824, that Lawrence’s studio was filled with works in progress and works unfinished, all available to view by his constant stream of sitters and visitors alike.²¹ Unlikely to approach Lawrence himself, as the artist was clearly the visual hagiographer of the Baring family and portraitist of other Rothschild rivals including John Julius Angerstein, N.M. turned to the no less expensive Hobday and decreed that size was all. No direct comparison between the two banking family portraits could have been made at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1821 as Mr Henry Baring had been summarily removed, but it may well have pleased N.M. to see Mrs Henry Baring alone with her children, in that the domestic bliss depicted by Hobday contrasts well with her singular state, though it was not remarked upon by critics and social commentators at the time.
It would seem, therefore, that N.M. was not untouched by art and was prepared to use it as a tool of propaganda in his rivalry with the House of Baring. That Hobday managed, with considerable skill, to convey successfully the theme that happiness in family life was also consistent with great financial success may have been more through luck than judgement, but a prominent place in the new New Court must surely be found for this popular painting and future visitors encouraged to reflect upon that theme.

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NOTES


2 The Newfoundland breed with a black head and black and white body is commonly named a Landseer Newfoundland, after the artist Sir Edwin Landseer who painted and popularised them, notably with his Lion – a Newfoundland dog, of 1824, now in the V&A, London, Inv. No. 812.1894. Lord Byron’s 1808 epitaph on his Newfoundland dog Boatrain includes the lines: ‘One who possessed Beauty without Vanity, Strength without Insolence, Courage without Ferocity, And all the Virtues of Man without his Vices.’


4 Three self-portraits by Hobday are known, two of 1793, one in miniature, both in the V&A, London, while a third of 1814 is in the Birmingham City Art Gallery.


6 Royal Academy Exhibition, 1821, No.575.


9 ral xi/109/35/4/18, J.D. Herrman to Lionel de Rothschild, 11 September, 1833 and kindly brought to my attention by George Ireland.


14 See Kenneth Garlick et al., op. cit., Vol.XIV, p.1397.

15 A restorer’s report in the mid-1980s concluded that the canvas had been cut at one side not in the middle, placing Henry Baring on the left. See Kenneth Garlick et al., op. cit., p.144.


17 See Kenneth Garlick et al., op. cit., p.144.


19 See Kenneth Garlick et al., op. cit., No.62 and plate 29.
