

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



The Rothschild family portrait in the reception area of New Court shortly after the building was opened in 1965.

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)

The family of W.N. Rothschild (sic), Consul General of His Austrian Majesty at the British Court, William Armfield Hobday.



formerly in the Historischesmuseum, Frankfurt by Hobday probably dates from Amschel's visit to London in 1819 and may have acted as a catalyst for the larger commission the following year.⁷ Though the size is unrecorded, this is a sensitive and elegant portrait, showing N.M.'s eldest brother in half-length, turning to the left in a poised moment of reflection, momentarily distracted from the book he holds in his right hand. Several friends and acquaintances of N.M.'s had already been painted by Hobday, including the Duke of Sussex whose portrait was sent to the Royal Academy in 1819, as had Alderman John Thomas Thorp, Lord Mayor of London in 1820 and whose portrait by Hobday was exhibited along with the Rothschild family in 1821. That year was clearly a high point in Hobday's career. He had recently been elected an Associate of the Royal Academy and attended the Academy's annual dinner in honour of the King's birthday on 16 July at which Sir Thomas Lawrence was conspicuous by his absence, and was seated next to his friend J.W.M. Turner.⁸

The choice of a well-known if not particularly distinguished portrait miniaturist to paint this group is extremely surprising, bearing in mind the scale – the work is 3m high and over 3.5m wide – huge by any standard. Hobday, who was reputed to have received 1,000 guineas for the work – though this is unsupported by any documentary proof – does in fact carry it off in a slightly naïve manner in that, as noted already, the composition works but technically his skills are clearly stretched. There is an element of hesitation in the handling of paint in the larger areas of drapery – Hannah's dress for example – and in the resolution of the pilaster, curtains and the sofa on which N.M. sits, which is rather confused. The colouring, too, is timid without the bravura required for a canvas of this size. Details, as one would expect from a miniaturist, can be very fine, notably the flowers held by Hannah Mayer and the pendant round the neck of daughter Charlotte which bears a striking resemblance to a real jewel, a heart-shaped locket, preserved in The Rothschild Archive, which bears her cipher and now contains a miniature of her husband, Anselm Salomon von Rothschild, whom she married in 1826. The characterisations are also quite solid, particularly those of brothers Lionel, Anthony and Nathaniel when compared with later likenesses.

However, there is a second unfortunate element that has often been remarked upon by patient visitors waiting in the New Court lobby. There is strong evidence to suggest that Hobday made a major technical mistake, probably due to the large number of children the Rothschilds had and the need for several sittings of groups or individual children when the overall composition was being worked out, as it is highly unlikely that the entire family ever sat *en masse*. Mayer Amschel was born in June 1818 while his sister Louise, the babe-in-arms, was born in July 1820, a period when the work, finished by May 1821, would have been in progress.



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 Hobday portrait of Amschel von Rothschild, N.M. Rothschild's eldest brother, was reproduced in *The Rise of the House of Rothschild*, Count Corti (London: Gollancz, 1928)



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



Nathan Mayer Rothschild, in a picture now attributed to Hobday.

to pass the paper to Mayer Amschel. The awkward gap that 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 balked 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.⁹ 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



The Hobday portrait dominating the General Office at New Court, in a photograph taken some time after the removal of desk partitions in 1947.

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*.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ In its present and final form the strange corners of drapery impinging without reason or support to the left and the – uncharacteristically for Lawrence – unformed landscape hint at the violence the picture suffered between 1817 and 1821.

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.

Sir Thomas Lawrence's
Mrs Henry Baring. Image
reproduced courtesy of
The Baring Archive Ltd.



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.

Dr Michael Hall is curator to Mr Edmund de Rothschild. He completed his PhD, Baron Lionel de Rothschild (1808–1879): The Biography of a Collector of Pictures, at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.

NOTES

- 1 N M Rothschild and Sons, London, Inv. No. NMR263, oil on canvas, 304.8 × 365.8cm. See Victor Gray and Melanie Aspey (editors) *The Life and Times of N M Rothschild 1777–1836* (London: N M Rothschild & Sons, 1998), p.106. Engraved in coloured mezzotint, n.d.
- 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. 852.1894. Lord Byron's 1808 epitaph on his Newfoundland dog *Boatswain* includes the lines: 'One who possessed Beauty without Vanity, Strength without Insolence, Courage without Ferocity, And all the Virtues of Man without his Vices.'
- 3 See F.M. O'Donoghue revising Liz Mellings, 'William Armfield Hobday' in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol.27, pp.401–2 and 'Memoire of William Armfield Hobday' in *Arnold's Library of Fine Art*, 4 vols (London, 1831), Vol.11, p.384.
- 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.
- 5 See Algernon Graves, *A Dictionary of Artists who have Exhibited Works in the Principal Galleries of London 1760 to 1893* (London: 1895), Vol.IV, pp.113–14. Sitters included Lady Struth, Lady Wilson, Admiral Wooley and a portrait of Elizabeth Haywood, 'the Wonderful Calculating Girl' in 1819.
- 6 Royal Academy Exhibition, 1821, No.575.
- 7 See Count Corti, *The Rise of the House of Rothschild* (London: Victor Gollancz 1928), pl.18. Destroyed in World War II.
- 8 See Kenneth Garlick, Angus Mackintyre and Kathryn Cave (editors), *Joseph Farington, Diaries, 1793–1821*, (London: Yale University Press 1978), Vol.XVI, p.5701.
- 9 RAL XI/109/33/4/18, J.D. Herrman to Lionel de Rothschild, 11 September, 1833 and kindly brought to my attention by George Ireland.
- 10 See Gray and Aspey, *op. cit.*, frontispiece and p.115 for Grosclaude, p.17 for Oppenheim and p.62 and p.92 for Beechey. All with N M Rothschild and Sons, London.
- 11 See Michael Hall, 'Nathan Rothschild as an owner of paintings' in Gray and Aspey, *op. cit.*, pp.68–77.
- 12 See *Inventory and Valuation of the Contents of Gunnersbury House, Ealing, Property of the Late Leopold de Rothschild, Esq.* Knight Frank and Rutley, November 1917 Vol.1 Contents, Vol.11 Items Selected as Exempt from Estate Duty with annotations, RAL 000/400.
- 13 See Kenneth Garlick, *Sir Thomas Lawrence: A Complete Catalogue of the Oil Paintings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), No.64 and Plate 60, and Michael Levey, *Sir Thomas Lawrence* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2005), p.243 and Plate 129.
- 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.
- 16 See Michael Levey, *op. cit.*, p.243.
- 17 See Kenneth Garlick et al., *op. cit.*, p.144.
- 18 See Philip Zeigler, *The Sixth Great Power: Barings 1762–1929* (London: Collins 1988), pp.46–7.
- 19 See Kenneth Garlick et al., *op. cit.*, No.62 and plate 29.
- 20 See Kenneth Garlick et al., *op. cit.*, No.63 and Michael Levey, *op. cit.*, p.167.
- 21 Emily Calmady, *Sir Thomas Lawrence's painting room: 65, Russell Square, London*, pencil and body-colour on paper, 22.8 × 43.5cm, signed and dated 1824. Yale Center for British Art. See Lowell Libson, *The First Five Years* (London: 2007), p.57, ill.