The collecting tastes of Baroness Edmond de Rothschild

The seventy-fifth anniversary of Baroness Edmond de Rothschild’s death in 2010 prompted a re-examination of the collections she bequeathed to her daughter-in-law, Dorothy, in 1935. They are now administered by the National Trust at Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire. Rachel Boak discusses the life of a lesser-known member of the Rothschild family.

Adelheid, Baroness Edmond de Rothschild (1815–1935) was the mother of James, who bequeathed Waddesdon to the National Trust in 1947. The granddaughter of Carl Mayer (1792–1855), founder of the Naples branch of the family bank, Adelheid was named after her grandmother, Carl Mayer’s wife, Adelheid Hertz (1800–1855). She was born in Frankfurt where her father, Wilhelm Carl, ran the original Rothschild banking house until it was wound up at his death in 1801. Her mother was Hannah Mathilde (1812–1844), elder sister of Ferdinand and Alice of Waddesdon. Adelheid’s parents maintained a strict Jewish orthodox household, and she retained a strong faith until the end of her life.

Baroness Edmond’s childhood was entwined with the lives of the Rothschilds who created Waddesdon Manor, as her aunt, Miss Alice (1847–1925) was her senior by only six years. At her mother’s death, Alice chose to live with her elder sister, Hannah Mathilde, and her family at the Grüneburg Villa, just outside Frankfurt. Alice and Adelheid’s close relationship had important consequences for Adelheid’s son, James, and the inheritance of collections now at Waddesdon.


In 1877, at the age of 24, Adelheid married her cousin Edmond, from Paris. Invitations were sent from both Frankfurt and Paris for the ceremony on 24 October, and the staff at the houses belonging to Edmond’s parents received gifts in honour of the day. Edmond was the son of the youngest of the original five Rothschild brothers, Baron James (1792–1865), who established a French branch of the family business in 1814, and Betty (1805–1885), daughter of Salomon Mayer of Vienna, and Ferdinand and Alice’s aunt.

Dorothy de Rothschild recalled that Baron and Baroness Edmond ‘doted on each other and each gave to the other the perfect understanding which is the dream of married life.’ While Edmond was fond of entertaining, his wife was of a quiet and retiring nature, preferring to be with her family. Dorothy described her as ‘pretty, with an exquisitely fair complexion, which she kept all her life.’ Edmond and Adelheid had three children: James (1878–1957), Maurice (1881–1957) and Miriam Caroline Alexandrine, (known as Alexandrine, 1884–1965).

In 1876, Edmond bought the palatial 41 rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré, and this became their Paris home. Adapted by Felix Langlais (1827–1886), the interiors showed that the prevailing Rothschild style was favoured by Baron and Baroness Edmond and fuelled by their collecting: eighteenth-century French panelling, alongside eighteenth- and nineteenth-century seat furniture, with Sèvres porcelain, French paintings and a proliferation of textiles.

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Baron Edmond and his wife had a close relationship, and this is reflected in the interior design of their Paris home. Photographs of the Boudoir Baronne show how Baroness Edmond decorated and used her private rooms, with textiles old and new. It is evident that historic patterns and techniques interested and inspired her, in both dress and decor. For example, a suite of seat furniture, with Sèvres porcelain, French paintings and a proliferation of textiles.

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32 & Châtel (established in 1762), between 1884 and 1889. Baron Ferdinand also used this firm, re-weaving eighteenth-century patterns for furnishings at Waddesdon. Some of Baroness Edmond’s furniture came to Waddesdon after her death, and is displayed in the Low White Drawing Room.

Baron and Baroness Edmond’s other residences were at Boulogne-sur-Seine, on the outskirts of the Bois de Boulogne in western Paris, and Armainvilliers, at Getz, south-east of Paris, a house they built between 1877 and 1897. In 1894, they visited Waddesdon, where they were inspired by Ferdinand’s grounds and the recently built Dairy, taking back several ideas to Armainvilliers. Their names appear in the Waddesdon visitors’ book.

Their collecting passion was such that Baron and Baroness Edmond looked for antiquities and textiles as they travelled, to places such as Persia (Iran), Russia and Turkey, often in their yacht, the Atmah, as well as acquiring items through dealers and shops in Paris. Some of these served as furnishings, but other collections were reserved for the connoisseur’s gaze, displayed or stored in cases and portfolios. Baroness Edmond followed the Rothschild taste for the French eighteenth century, but concentrated on costume and accessories: buttons, fans, lace, seals and textiles.

From the 1880s Adelheid supported Edmond in his work of settling Jewish people in Palestine, and they journeyed to the Middle East together several times. Baroness Edmond founded hospitals, schools and synagogues to serve the new Jewish colonies. She was similarly concerned with health and education, particularly for women and children, in her home city of Frankfurt, and in Paris. In her will, she named a number of charitable institutions and bequeathed generous sums to each.

Baron Edmond died a year after her husband. Their properties and collections were divided between their children. In 1913, James had married an Englishwoman, Dorothy Pinto. As he was the son of her favourite niece, Miss Alice left Waddesdon to James and Dorothy on her death in 1922, causing them to settle permanently in Buckinghamshire.

Dorothy de Rothschild recorded the first crates of objects from Paris arriving at Waddesdon in 1936, including furniture, paintings and porcelain. Baroness Edmond bequeathed the bulk of her collection of lace, buttons, costume, fans and textiles to Dorothy, but these were among items in store at the Banque de France from April 1939 and confiscated by the Nazis when Paris was occupied in 1940. The house on the rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré was requisitioned by Hermann Goering for his staff, and they seized any remaining works of art. The confiscated objects were meticulously inventoried and numbered, and finally dispatched to Waddesdon between 1947 and 1969 following their recovery from the Austrian salt mines.

The formation of Baroness Edmond’s collections during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with the economic development of Paris and its recovery from the Franco-Prussian war (1870–1871), a recovery in which the Rothschild bank had played its part. The spread of industry and the expansion of service trades, such as department stores and the larger fashion industry, cemented Paris’s position as a commercial power, and the city to which the world would flock to do its shopping.

The collection of Baroness Edmond’s tastes differ in character from some Rothschild collections in that she was not primarily acquiring items for use, although she did utilise textiles as furnishings, and historic buttons and lace as dress accessories. Dorothy noted that she ‘liked to amass specific collections; once she had decided on collecting fans or buttons, seals or lace, for example, she would continue to do so over the years, whether or not she had any particular use for them’. In the case of Baroness Edmond’s large collection of textile fragments, Dorothy attributes their acquisition to her housewifely duty ‘to have adequate spares for any eventuality’, but they include exquisite French eighteenth-century dress and furnishing silks, and more exotic examples from the Near and Middle East.
In this sense, Baroness Edmond's collections fall into the category of feminine collecting, with their concentration on articles for furnishing or dress, more likely to be seen and used in the home, than exhibited outside it. At a time when many women were forming such collections, Baroness Edmond had the means to acquire the very best of everything, and Dorothy records that Edmond ‘always delighted in extolling her wife’s taste and knowledge whenever textiles of any kind were concerned’. Her treatment of and attitude towards her collections of buttons, costume, fans, lace, textiles and seals suggest both a practical mind and a love of beauty and ingenuity, influenced by the fashions of the day and her own interests.

The best-known group within Baroness Edmond’s collections is that of nearly 600 buttons. She began collecting buttons in the late nineteenth century, at a time when it was fashionable to acquire French fausses (ornaments) of the eighteenth century. Other Rothschilds, including Ferdinand and Alice, were similarly engaged, collecting gold boxes, jewellery, cane and parasol handles, and other small-scale metal objects. However, Baroness Edmond was not only interested in buttons as glittering miniature examples of craftsmanship, but also as items of dress. She sought out colours – purples, blues, yellows – that suited her, and subjects – flowers, costume, classical scenes – that interested her. She also acquired hat pins, which became necessary and extremely fashionable because of the large hat styles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and seals, further evidence of her taste for eighteenth-century trinkets.

Sets of buttons were purchased through Parisian antique dealers and jewellers, and from other European jewellers with outlets in Paris. Alongside names such as Guérès, A. Bicêtre et Carrié, Boin-Tahuret and R. Lalique, are J. Tostrup (1868–1890) and David Andersen (1843–1901), Norwegian silversmiths whose firms exist today.

The buttons were stored by set in small boxes within a seventeenth-century Japanese lacquer chest. Baroness Edmond bequeathed them to Dorothy, writing, ‘I give to my dear Dolly the Jodo-Chinese coffee containing my collection of buttons. I also give her the antique buttons that decorate my dresses and coats’. A surviving button box from Boin-Tahuret shows a label bearing a Nazi inventory number, suggesting that the chest containing the buttons was amongst the items confiscated by the Nazis in 1940.

Baroness Edmond’s collection of lace ranges in date from the late seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. It includes cuffs, sleeve ruffles, dress edgings, bobbins, steals and a small amount of furnishing lace from major centres of production, such as Venice, Brussels and Alençon. Her personal taste veered towards delicate patterns of the 1700s, the largest group in the collection, rather than the more fashionable late seventeenth-century Italian lace.

The sources from which Baroness Edmond acquired lace are unknown. Unlike the buttons, not all of it is in good condition, or of the best quality. This suggests that she might have bought in lots. At Waddesdon, there are examples of blue ribbons from dealers’ price tags and shop labels (such as As Au Bon Marché) still attached to some textiles, giving a sense of how they came into her possession. Like her husband, who had chamois-lined boxes made for his porcelain and antiques, Baroness Edmond had a velvet-covered, satin-lined chest in which the lace was kept, and in which it was seized in 1940.

Just as there is no record of where and over what time-scale Baroness Edmond acquired the lace, there is no indication as to why she separated 17 lots from the main bequest to Dorothy at Waddesdon, giving them to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. It may be that Baroness Edmond wished an element of her collection to remain in the city where she had passed most of her life.

Baroness Edmond’s collections include a small group of costume. As no one piece provides a complete example of fashionable dress, it is likely that she acquired these items because she liked the cut or pattern of the fabric, rather than as perfectly-preserved illustrations of historical styles.

Dorothy commented that her mother-in-law’s ‘normal attire consisted of clothing which was drab but comfortable’. However, surviving studio photographs show that Baroness Edmond occasionally dressed up in reproduction eighteenth-century costume. These ensembles were embellished with historic buttons, lace and fans.

Fans in the nineteenth century were different from their eighteenth-century predecessors, being larger in size and incorporating many mechanically-made elements. Still part of fashionable evening ensembles, and a requirement at Court, it was also possible to purchase antique fans from dealers, such as J. Duvelleroy, who supplied fans to the Rothschilds and to the British royal family. Earlier fans were often framed as decorations in bedrooms or dressing rooms.

The subjects depicted on Baroness Edmond’s fans have parallels in many other objects now at Waddesdon, suggesting a unified taste across all types of artworks. For example, figures in historical and carnival costume echo Thomas Gainsborough’s Master Francis Nicholls, known as The Pick Boy (1782), bequeathed by Baron Ferdinand to Baroness Edmond, and Antoine Watteau’s Arlequin, Pierrot et Scapin (1719), acquired by Baroness Edmond and bequeathed to James. The scene on the fan The birth, circa 1750, is taken from an engraving after François Boucher that also appears on a 1765 Sèvres vase put par cuivre à feuilles de mélus from Baron Edmond’s collection. Nine fans were bequeathed to Dorothy, and were among the items seized by the Nazis, before their eventual arrival at Waddesdon.
Following their recovery after the war, Baroness Edmond's collections were displayed in former bedrooms in the west wing at Waddesdon, converted into display areas by the architect R. J. Page between 1968 and 1970.\(^{15}\) Called the Store Rooms because they exhibited treasures from the storerooms, they included a large case of costume, textiles, lace and fans (known as the Shop Window) as a tribute by Dorothy to her mother-in-law's collecting tastes.\(^{16}\) The buttons were displayed in wall cases in the Blue Room (now known as the Goodwood Room) along with additional pieces of lace.

In the 1990s, when the Manor was closed for four years of restoration, Baroness Edmond’s collections were carefully packed away because of the fragile nature of the material, re-appearing in the documentation of the costume and textiles in store.\(^{17}\) Additional items given or lent by other members of the Rothschild family. She is currently working on the bedrooms in the west wing at Waddesdon, converted into display areas by the architect R. J. Page.

Rachel Buck is a Curator at Waddesdon Manor with responsibility for the collection of costume and textiles, including the original furnishing textiles chosen by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild for the house, and additional items given or lent by other members of the Rothschild family. She is currently working on the documentation of the costumes and textiles in store.

**Notes**


2. *‘A Monument Civil conçu pour Honorier Monsieur Baron Edmond de Rothschild et Madame sa femme* [Le Bon Edmond, no. 10, October 1877].


6. Michael Hall argues that Edmond stood apart from other members of the Rothschild family in forming collections inspired by aesthetic and artistic interests, rather than primarily as furnishings or investments. For example, his collections of antiquities, prints and engravings, now divided between the Musée du Louvre and Waddesdon. Hall, *Waddesdon Manor*, pp.211 and p.214.

7. See also Sue Harthorne, *Barrons and the Baroness*, BBC Home & Antiques Magazine (November 2010), 12–13.

8. Rachel Buck, ‘A Carouse at Waddesdon Manor with responsibility for the collection of costumes and textiles, including the original furnishing textiles chosen by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild for the house, and additional items given or lent by other members of the Rothschild family. She is currently working on the documentation of the costumes and textiles in store.'