



Detail from a portrait of N.M. Rothschild and his family, by William Armfield Hobday, 1821. Charlotte, third from left, is shown standing beside her mother; oil on canvas. Private Collection, London.

Charlotte ‘Chilly’ von Rothschild: mother, connoisseur, and artist

Evelyn M. Cohen presents the life and work of one of the most accomplished artistic talents in the Rothschild family.

Charlotte von Rothschild (10 August 1807 – 17 May 1859), affectionately referred to within her family as Chilly, was the first-born child of Nathan Mayer Rothschild, founder of the Rothschild bank in London, and his wife Hannah Barent Cohen. A talented and innovative artist, Chilly’s accomplishments have remained largely overshadowed by those of other illustrious members of her family.

Charlotte, who was born in Manchester and raised in London along with her six siblings, married her cousin Anselm von Rothschild in 1826 and moved to Frankfurt where her husband was active in the bank run by Amschel Mayer von Rothschild, uncle to both members of the bridal couple. Over a period of twenty years they had eight children, seven of whom survived into adulthood.¹

Early in her marriage Charlotte was portrayed by the Dutch-born painter Ary Scheffer, who was active in Paris beginning in 1811. Executed around 1827–1828, the portrait depicts Charlotte in three-quarter view, seated serenely while gazing at the viewer.² The painting was executed either during her pregnancy or within the short life of her first-born child Mayer Anselm Léon, who was born on 7 July 1827 and died a year later on 11 July 1828. Charlotte’s life of privilege is made evident in Scheffer’s work by the elegant white, somewhat diaphanous, gown and the lavish jewellery she wears.

Charlotte was devoted to her offspring. Perhaps as a consequence of experiencing the loss of Mayer when he was only one, she wrote to her mother about how extremely anxious she was when her children were ill. As a young mother of two daughters, two-year old Julie and nine-month-old Hannah Mathilde, she informed her mother about a soirée she gave for her brother Anthony before his departure that ‘went off very well and would have been very comfortable had I not been rather uneasy about my little girls who had a bad cold.’³ A touching testament to her dedication to her children comes from a statement her son Ferdinand (1839–1898) wrote in his memoirs: ‘All my love went to my Mother, who indeed sacrificed the whole of her short life (we lost her in 1859) to the care and tuition of her young family.’⁴

While Charlotte was visiting her mother in London in the 1840s, Hannah wrote to her daughter-in-law Louisa, who was in Paris, reporting that Chilly’s ‘sole desire is for the improvement in all respects of her children & is indefatigable for this purpose.’⁵ Charlotte’s involvement in the education of her offspring is also apparent in Ferdinand’s account of his childhood in which he recounted that his mother taught him to spell before entrusting him to the care of a French governess and the family tutor. Chilly, who was an art lover, taught her children to appreciate paintings in the family’s collection. Ferdinand described how he would study them, learning under his ‘Mother’s tuition to distinguish a Teniers from an Ostade or a Wouvermans from a Both.’⁶

Charlotte actively acquired art on her own. Ferdinand recounted that in 1854 or 1855, when ‘Count Schörnbrun of Pommersfeld [*sic*],’ near Würzburg, decided to sell his art treasures, Chilly, who was in Frankfurt, travelled there, but purchased only a small painting by Gabriël

Metsu. She had been greatly impressed by some sixteenth-century stamped leather wall hangings she saw, but it seems that to make a major purchase of this type she needed the permission of her husband. Her uncle James, who at the time was in Frankfurt, undermined her goal. His passion for acquiring art was described by Charlotte's brother Mayer as a 'mania,' evidenced by James chasing after antiquities regardless of the distance he needed to travel or of unfavorable weather conditions.⁷ Forgetting about how competitive her family members were, Charlotte naively told her uncle about the wonderful hangings. He feigned disinterest, but immediately took off the next day to acquire the works for his Château de Ferrières.

Typical of women of her standing, Chilly engaged in crafts herself. Ferdinand described how he nestled at her feet while she worked on some tapestry chairs, and how he possessed a settee made by her hands, which she designed in consultation with him. He wrote that his mother belonged to a sewing circle called the *Näh Verein*, in which women of all ages would assemble in the evenings to make 'garments, knitted stockings and muffetees for the poor, while they drank tea, ate ices and cakes, and recorded the latest news.'

Ferdinand also recounted how in the early 1840s Amschel gave his niece and nephew property at Grüneburg, on the outskirts of Frankfurt, along with funds to build a house on it. Charlotte originally wanted it designed in an English manner, but ultimately it was built primarily in a French style. Ferdinand recalled how his mother, who was adept at gardening, helped plan the grounds with plantings of young chestnut trees on each side of the road. He also claimed that the design of the interior, in the style of Louis XV, was requested by Charlotte who was inspired by a Pompadour bed she had seen in Paris.⁸

Above all, Charlotte took an active interest in painting. It is not known when she began to study art, but the painter and art dealer Moritz Oppenheim wrote in his memoir that when she asked if he would take her on as a student, she informed him that she had previously studied with the French painter Baron François Gérard.⁹ Charlotte must have begun studying with Oppenheim by 1831 at the latest, as he introduced her as his pupil in a letter to the painter Wilhelm Hensel dated 21 June of that year.¹⁰



Opposite
Charlotte, Baroness
Anselm von Rothschild
by Ary Scheffer, 1827–28;
oil on canvas.

Waddesdon, The Rothschild
Collection (The National Trust)
Gift of Dorothy de Rothschild,
1971; acc. no. 3348 © The National
Trust, Waddesdon Manor.

Left
Self-portrait of Charlotte
painting her husband
Anselm von Rothschild,
two of their children,
and their nanny, 1838; oil on
canvas.

Private Collection, London.





Her correspondence with members of her family indicates that Charlotte was a dedicated painter. In 1834 she wrote to her mother about her life in Frankfurt; she recounted that her 'mornings were occupied in copying a very pretty picture Mrs. De Bethmann has lent me,' while after lunch she walked with her daughters [Julie and Hannah Mathilde].¹¹ Six years later Chilly once again described her routine in Frankfurt, this time in a letter she wrote to her brother Anthony in London. She explained that she did not have much news to report as 'the day passes quietly enough, in my usual occupations of painting, reading, and attending to my children & household duties.'¹²

Until recently Charlotte's art was known primarily from her self-portrait in which she depicted herself seated before an easel while painting an image of Anselm on a canvas (see page 30).¹³ Her husband is seated at the left, between Charlotte and a shaded window. His walking stick, gloves, and hat are placed somewhat haphazardly on the table next to him, as though he had taken his place in a hurry. This is an apt depiction as Anselm – described by Ferdinand as a rather distant father – was frequently away from home for long periods of time. Charlotte also includes two of her children. The older one, who clutches a doll, points to the unfinished canvas, while the baby is held in the arms of a nanny. The small space they occupy includes paintings on the back wall, a paint box in the foreground at the right, and a cabinet with curios behind the artist. In this idealised domestic setting Charlotte portrayed herself attired in lovely clothing, with nary a drop of paint staining it.

The most ambitious work of art known to have been undertaken by Charlotte is a haggadah, the liturgical book used during the ceremonial Passover dinners, which she illuminated for her uncle Amschel, completing it in 1842.¹⁴ While a professional scribe was hired to pen the text in Hebrew and German, the decorations, as indicated by Charlotte on the Hebrew title page, were executed by her. That Chilly could write Hebrew is clear from a letter she sent to her sister Louisa in 1832.¹⁵ The somewhat awkward letters of the title page and of the inscriptions that identify the biblical illustrations appear to be by Charlotte's hand.

In decorating the manuscript, Chilly relied on both Jewish and Christian sources, often with changes that reflect contemporary nineteenth-century tastes. The appearance of the title page is largely adapted from one of the pages of the *Book of Hours of Frederick III of Aragon*.¹⁶ The architecture, curtains, and angels holding candles are virtually identical in the two manuscripts. In both a red panel within a gold frame contains a text written in gold letters that include a large initial letter. A table with a white cloth covering on it and a blue fabric on the side facing the viewer fills the bottom of both pages. All of the Christian motifs, such as a cross and incense burner found in the book of hours were removed by Charlotte. In their place she decorated the space in front of the table with the Rothschild coat of arms set within an elaborate frame. The bottom of the frame and the strand of jewels were copied from yet another page from the Christian manuscript.

An illustration of the four sons discussed in the text of the haggadah is based on a traditional Jewish source. The scene is derived from an image first created in the well-known printed *Amsterdam Haggadah* of 1695, in which all four sons mentioned in the text appear within one panel. This grouping has continued to be used by artists through the centuries.

Title page of the haggadah in which Charlotte, who identifies herself as the daughter of Nathan Rothschild, wrote that she 'drew [these illustrations] with my weak hand.' The same humble phrase appears in her lengthy German dedication to her uncle on page four of the manuscript.

Braginsky Collection B314, Zurich.



Although in Charlotte's haggadah the placement of the sons and some of the poses of the figures have been retained, the clothing reflects a contemporary taste for recreating medieval and Renaissance styles of dress. Particularly worthy of note is the hat with the feather worn by the youngest son.

Similar hats are worn by the two youths depicted on the right side of the table in the scene of a seder, the ceremonial dinner. Although the Passover meal appears to take place within a contemporary German room, the clothing of these two figures, as well as those of the women seated opposite them are not typical attire of the period. Romanticised fashion of a pseudo-medieval and Renaissance style was of interest at the time. Paintings of the period in France and Germany recreated historical scenes in which similar clothing was shown. In the case of the seder scene, however, it seems likely that Charlotte was inspired not by paintings by other artists, but by garments that belonged to members of her family. The portrait of Betty de Rothschild and her son Alphonse of circa 1835 depicts them standing in their residence at 19, rue Laffitte in Paris. Both the newly decorated interior and the costumes worn by the two figures are inspired by the style of Francis I of France.

Charlotte identified herself as the artist in only one place in the haggadah. She painted her initials on the back of the chair of the male figure at the right. Her initials, CR, also appear at the top of several letters Chilly wrote, where they are embossed and embellished with a coronet. Oppenheim wrote that the highpoint of his teaching career was when he



Opposite

Detail of page 13 of the haggadah in which the sons are identified in the Hebrew inscription on the scroll. It reads from right to left: 'wise, wicked, simple, [and] who doesn't know how to ask.'

Braginsky Collection B314, Zurich.

Detail of the seder scene on page 42 of the haggadah. The Hebrew verse inscribed beneath the illustration is Exodus 13:8.

Braginsky Collection B314, Zurich.

assisted Charlotte while she worked on the haggadah,¹⁷ although it is not clear exactly how much he contributed to the design of this manuscript. Some of the motifs in the haggadah relate to drawings executed by him, while others are based on Christian manuscripts, which Oppenheim noted Charlotte borrowed from the library in Paris.¹⁸ In the case of the seder scene, similar representations are found in Oppenheim's oeuvre, but all known examples postdate Chilly's work. In Oppenheim's depictions the figures wear contemporary clothing and the haggadot on the table are printed books rather than illuminated manuscripts, as portrayed by Charlotte.

The production of handwritten and painted haggadot was relatively rare in nineteenth-century Europe. It is not known if the Rothschilds owned decorated medieval Hebrew manuscripts at this time, though it seems they had not yet begun to collect illuminated Christian manuscripts.¹⁹ That members of the Rothschild family were interested in art of the Renaissance is demonstrated by a painting commissioned decades earlier. In 1824 Charlotte's uncle Carl von Rothschild had Oppenheim paint a panel painting, now lost, depicting Susanna and the Elders. The choice of panel instead of canvas reflects a Renaissance, rather than a contemporary, taste.

The haggadah of 1842 that Charlotte produced for her uncle Amschel is the earliest Hebrew manuscript documented as having been illuminated by a woman. It is the product of an exceptional personality. Intelligent, cultured, and talented, at a time when printed books were the

norm, Chilly created an illuminated codex that draws on earlier Jewish sources, Christian models, and the latest developments in nineteenth-century art. It would be seven years before Henry Noel Humphries published a book that encouraged a return to manuscript production modelled after medieval and Renaissance examples, considered by him to be an ideal art form.²⁰ As such, Charlotte and the haggadah she created were not only of her time, but ahead of her time.

Dr. Evelyn M. Cohen (PhD Columbia University), an art historian, is a former Samuel H. Kress Fellow, and Coleman Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She received the National Jewish Book Award for her publication on the Rothschild Mahzor.

In loving memory of Mirella Levi D'Ancona

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NOTES

- 1 From Hannah's correspondence it is clear that Charlotte also had a difficult pregnancy that terminated in a miscarriage in 1842. See RAL 000/10/21, 167, and 24.
- 2 Ary Scheffer painted a portrait of Charlotte de Rothschild, Chilly's Parisian cousin in 1836 as well. This Charlotte, born to James and Betty de Rothschild in 1825, was a painter of landscapes and still lifes.
- 3 RAL XI/109/27/3/15, 26 December 1832.
- 4 Ferdinand's unpublished memoir housed at Waddesdon Manor. All subsequent citations of his comments are from this journal.
- 5 RAL 000/297/2/38 and Lady Battersea Papers RAL 000/297. Louisa was the wife of Hannah's son Anthony.
- 6 Works by the artists Ferdinand referred to were probably acquired as part of the collection of Dutch paintings from the estate of Klerck de Reuss, which Charlotte and Anselm purchased in 1842.
- 7 Mayer recounted this in a letter to his mother dated 21 July 1839, RAL XI/109/37/1/4.
- 8 For a further description and some illustrations of the villa, see Pauline Prévost-Marcilhacy, *Les Rothschild: bâtisseurs et mécènes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), pp.64–66.
- 9 Moritz Oppenheim, *Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main), p.74. Gérard is recorded as having painted portraits of Charlotte's cousin and close friend Betty de Rothschild in 1828 and 1829, at which time Chilly may have been introduced to him. Oppenheim painted portraits of many Rothschild family members, worked as their agent in acquiring works of art, and instructed Charlotte and some of her children. Chilly's personal account book of 1841–55 records five payments to 'Professor Oppenheim,' but the purpose of these expenditures was not noted. RAL 58–1–806.
- 10 Jerusalem, NLL, Moritz Oppenheim Archive, ms Var. 388, 154a.
- 11 RAL XI/109/27/3/11, 17 October [1834].
- 12 RAL XI/104/0/404, Christmas week [1840].
- 13 Rothschild files of the paintings in New Court record that this oil on canvas painting, measuring 14 x 17 inches, is signed by the artist and dated 1838. Neither can be seen presently.
- 14 The entire manuscript, now in the Braginsky Collection in Zurich, B314, can be viewed at the collection's website, www.braginskycollection.com. The haggadah is described in *A Journey through Jewish Worlds: Highlights from the Braginsky Collection of Hebrew Manuscripts and Printed Books*, eds. Evelyn M. Cohen, Sharon Liberman Mintz, and Emile G.L. Schrijver (Amsterdam: Bijzondere Collecties, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2009), no.55, 148–53, and *Schöne Seiten: Jüdische Schriftkultur aus der Braginsky Collection*, eds. Emile Schrijver, Falk Wiesemann, et al. (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2011), no.16, pp.80–85.
- 15 RAL, XI/109/27/3/13, 11 November [1832].
- 16 A discussion of the haggadah and its relationship to the *Book of Hours of Frederick III of Aragon*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Lat. 10532, a Christian medieval manuscript that served as a model for some of the imagery is discussed in Evelyn M. Cohen, 'A Surprising Model for Charlotte Rothschild's Haggadah of 1842,' *Arts Judaica*, 10 (2014): 37–48. The title page is based on p.199 of the book of hours.
- 17 Oppenheim, *Erinnerungen*, p.75.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 See Christopher de Hamel, *The Rothschilds and their Collections of Illuminated Manuscripts* (London: The British Library, 2005), p.24. Their lack of ownership of these works at this time would explain Charlotte's need to borrow manuscripts from the library in Paris. It is noteworthy that James de Rothschild began collecting Christian manuscripts, specifically illuminated books of hours, beginning in the 1850s.
- 20 Henry Noel Humphreys, *The Art of Illumination and Missal Painting: A Guide to Modern Illuminators* (London: H.G. Bohm, 1949).



Betty, Baroness James de Rothschild and her son Alphonse dressed in costume in the Francis I salon of 19, rue Laffitte in Paris. Both the costumes and the interior are inspired by the style of Francis I of France and might well have influenced Charlotte as she planned the illustrations in the haggadah. Private Collection, France.