

Butlers and boardrooms: Alfred de Rothschild as collector and connoisseur

Alfred de Rothschild (1842–1918) was a flamboyant dandy whose sumptuous taste impressed and amused Edwardian society. As a connoisseur, however, he had a considerable and lasting impact on the way we perceive our national collections. Jonathan Conlin reveals another side to the foppish caricature.

In the family tree of the English branch of the Rothschilds, Alfred de Rothschild is easily overlooked. A second son, a reluctant banker who left no legitimate offspring, Alfred was an active collector with a style of his own. In the years after his death, however, the paintings and other furnishings from his two residences at Seamore Place in London and Halton in Buckinghamshire were dispersed. The former was demolished in 1938, the latter sold to the War Office in 1918 after war-time use by the Royal Flying Corps as an officers' mess. Although the massive conservatory and lavish gardens have gone, the central block of Halton has been carefully preserved by the RAF. Its popularity as a film location notwithstanding, security concerns have inevitably left this monument to Rothschild taste largely off-limits to the public.

Alfred himself would probably be entirely forgotten today, had the contrast between his diminutive physical presence and flamboyant lifestyle not caught the eye of Max Beerbohm. Satires such as *Roughing it at Halton* have immortalised Alfred as an exquisite Edwardian hypochondriac, a Fabergé Humpty-Dumpty terrified that he might get broken after all, despite having all the King's doctors and all his footmen on hold to put him back together again. Niall Ferguson's history of the Rothschilds presents Alfred as someone who 'lived the life of a *fin de siècle* aesthete, at once effete and faintly risqué'.¹ With his tendency to turn up for work at New Court at 2pm (only to enjoy a long lunch and afternoon nap), Alfred's aloofness seems typical of a broader trend visible across all branches of the family in the decades after 1870. Increasingly suspicious of co-operative ventures, many individual partners chose to withdraw capital rather than live off interest, immersing themselves in charitable activity while at the same time failing to seize new opportunities in North America. Although Alfred's informal diplomacy around the turn of the century does not go unremarked, for the most part Ferguson casts Alfred in a subsidiary role, as a curious yet ultimately ineffectual figure.²

There was one field, however, where Alfred loomed large: government arts administration, and specifically the direction of the great public art collections. Here he built on his own reputation as an important collector of eighteenth-century English and French art, and capitalised on his close relations with government, securing appointment as a Trustee of the National Gallery (in 1892) and as a founding Trustee of the Wallace Collection (in 1897) and serving continuously in both capacities until his death in 1918. Although the powers of such Trustees are relatively limited today, in the period considered here they exerted considerable influence over policy on acquisitions, cleaning, access and hanging. In Alfred's day, however, this power was being challenged.

In the years between 1880 and 1920 there arose a new generation of art critics and experts who challenged the authority of such titled art lovers (or 'amateurs') to lead museums. The very label 'amateur' threatened to become pejorative. It had previously been used to denote a wealthy individual endowed with special understanding and knowledge of art by the financial and emotional stake in the artworks he owned. Yet those who sought to malign the amateur as amateurish had yet to formulate a viable concept of the discipline we now know as 'art history'. The

Opposite
Lady Bamfylde, Sir Joshua Reynolds, bequeathed by Alfred de Rothschild, 1918.
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The Bampfylde Room
at Halton, Alfred's dining
room.

relationship between the skills and knowledge associated with this 'science' and that practical knowledge of art technique associated with professional artists was ill-defined. The result was a surprisingly fluid, three-way struggle which lent the debates surrounding museums, academies and exhibitions a venomous fierceness – as well as making them of great interest to the historian interested in the role of the state, aristocracy and middle class in shaping and policing ideas of national culture. At the centre of these debates we discover another Alfred from that depicted by Beerbohm: combative, passionate, infuriating, stubborn – anything but ornamental.

Alfred's interest in Old Master paintings seems to have started young, and it appears that he was personally involved in acquiring several of the paintings in the collection of his father, Lionel, who died in 1879. His time at Cambridge was brief (1861–62) and undistinguished. Only three letters home from Cambridge survive among the papers in The Rothschild Archive, and none of them mentions study.³ Although there is no evidence to suggest a wild youth, Alfred seems to have had difficulty finding something to occupy himself with. He dutifully fulfilled expectations by following his father and elder brother into the family bank and was even elected a Director of the Bank of England in 1868, the first Jew to hold the office. Fortunately wealth provided opportunities to build fabulous homes, beginning with Seamore Place, completed in 1876 and followed by the sumptuous pleasure palace of Halton, built to designs by William Rogers in 1882–8. And homes needing furnishing, with art, and with guests.

His collection began with the 38 predominately Dutch paintings inherited from his father, and numbered more than 200 works at his death. A significant proportion of the collection was acquired in two blocks, in June 1885 and October 1907: a group of eighteenth-century French works bought from the Earl of Lonsdale and 28 pictures from Lord Ashburton's collection respectively. The latter group included six works now in the Metropolitan, New York, including three Rembrandts.⁴ Other works, notably the English portraits, were acquired piecemeal from other aristocrats, who appreciated the tactful discretion which marked Alfred's collecting, as, indeed, it did that of many other Rothschilds. He appears to have had strong suspicions of dealers, a situation which came to a head when he used his position as a Bank of England Director to find out how much a dealer had profited from selling on a painting bought from Rothschild himself. This abuse forced his resignation from the bank in 1889, and doubtless explains the slightly ludicrous telegram he later sent to the National Gallery board from Monte Carlo, insisting that 'it would be a great mistake ... to purchase pictures from dealers'.⁵

A 1973 study of Alfred's taste concluded that his collection was 'truly eccentric'.⁶ That is going a little too far. His taste for seventeenth-century Dutch masters, for Reynolds and

Gainsborough was if anything a throwback to the taste of Sir Robert Peel and other connoisseurs of fifty years before. In 1916, when the Gallery seriously considered selling off some of Peel's collection of Dutch paintings (acquired in 1871), Alfred protested strongly that they were 'gems'.⁷ To that extent his taste was 'unreconstructed', not least in preferring Guardis and *Seicento* works to the earlier *Quattrocento* Italians rediscovered earlier in the century. His purchase of a highly questionable Titian belonging to the 2nd Lord Methuen for £3,500 (*Toilet of Venus*, now Courtauld Gallery) suggests that his eye for Italians was less than acute.

In buying eighteenth-century French art Alfred was more in tune with his times, the Goncourt Brothers having attracted renewed attention to this school. His interest earned him the honour of being appointed one of the founding Trustees of the Wallace Collection by Lady Wallace, a duty he clearly took very seriously. Alfred sat on the official committee which in 1897 considered the question of where and how the Wallace Bequest should be housed, opposing plans to move the collection to a new annexe to be built on the Hampton Site contiguous to the National Gallery. Alfred saw the Wallace paintings, furnishings and armour as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, fearing that a more scholarly arrangement would prevent visitors from admiring the taste with which Sir Richard Wallace had arranged his possessions. At the same time he insisted on the installation of electric lighting, donating several electric torchieres. Such illumination had been laid on at Halton, but was almost unheard of in public galleries. He also had the gilding on the furniture and frames renewed, something which struck many as vulgar.⁸

An enthusiasm for paintings of attractive women clearly played a significant role in guiding Alfred's taste, as seen in the coquettish Reynolds portrait of *Miss Angelo* (1770, acquired by 1884) and in the sultry portraits of pubescent girls by Greuze. Alfred owned several examples of these, unsuccessfully attempting to acquire yet one more from Sir Richard Wallace in 1875, when he offered to swap it for some Sèvres porcelain.⁹ As a Trustee he would infuriate a succession of Gallery Directors by opposing the purchase of works depicting women he thought ugly or plain, even when painted by artists of which he approved, such as Bronzino.

Collecting for Alfred was primarily about furnishing the walls of his residences, something that might lead us to belittle his taste. In fact, the paintings were the focus of the spaces he created for himself and his guests, as is shown by the way he named rooms after the painters whose works hung there, or even after a specific painting, as seen in the 'Bampfylde Room' at Halton, where the eponymous portrait (1776) by Reynolds hung.¹⁰ These paintings were the backdrop to the opulent entertainments Alfred put on for his guests at Halton. As Alfred's guest book attests,¹¹ these hailed not only from the political and aristocratic elite, but also from the stage,



Roughing it at Halton, Sir Max Beerbohm's view of Alfred de Rothschild.

Far right
Alfred de Rothschild,
Julius Luz.



professional sport and the gossip columns. Some visitors, such as the 27th Earl of Crawford, found the rich Louis Quinze furnishings overdone and Alfred's performances in his private circus vulgar. The majority admired the gilt and applauded the antics of Milsom Rees, a master at chicken mesmerising, an art now sadly neglected.¹²

It wasn't just Rees' hens that were hypnotised by Alfred's wealth – the Earl of Rosebery was, too. To those Liberals desperate to find an act to follow Gladstone, Rosebery emanated an aura of youthful promise foreshadowing that which would later smother Anthony Eden. When Rosebery married into the Rothschild clan in 1878, Alfred and his brothers seemed to have gained a useful tool. In terms of foreign policy, Ferguson has suggested that they got little leverage out of this union.¹³ In terms of museum policy, the story is rather different, and the Alfred-Rosebery relationship takes us to the heart of that conflict between 'old' connoisseurship and 'new' curatorship in which Alfred played such a key role.

In the mid-1850s the National Gallery had undergone a series of reforms, which included an 1855 Treasury Minute creating the post of Gallery Director. The Minute gave the first Director (Charles Eastlake) a ring-fenced purchase grant and instructed him to use it to fill those 'gaps' which prevented the nation's collection from serving as a 'complete' history of art. A practising painter and President of the Royal Academy, Eastlake was also a scholar in touch with the latest German scholarship, which emphasised archival research and close stylistic comparisons. He made use of his powers to travel widely across Europe, greatly enriching the Gallery's holdings, especially those of *Quattrocento* paintings that Trustees such as Peel had previously disdained as curiosities of little aesthetic value.

Subsequent Directors endeavoured to follow Eastlake's example, even while they faced increasing competition from European galleries and tighter restrictions on export of art works from Italian states. Meanwhile the Trustees accepted their advisory role. Thanks to falling grain prices and the introduction of heavier death duties in the final decades of the century however, many of the great landed collections started to hit the London art markets. German and especially American industrial magnates were keen to buy the trappings of old money, driving up prices against museums increasingly concerned at the loss of masterpieces abroad. Lobbying for special Treasury grants placed an increased burden on Trustees, whose profile and sense of responsibility naturally grew. Alfred's first taste of such activity came in 1884, when he involved himself in the state's efforts to acquire works from the Blenheim Sale. In 1890 he donated £10,000 towards the Gallery's purchase of Holbein's *Ambassadors* from the Earl of Radnor.¹⁴

Although he was known as a collector, at the time of his appointment to the National Gallery board in 1892 Alfred appears to have been a peripheral figure. In convincing Prime



Seamore Place, from Alfred's privately produced guide to his collection. Alfred wrote in the preface, 'The principal objects, and those which, needless to say, I most prize, I inherited from my dearly beloved father, and, in addition to the great pleasure which they afford me, they constantly remind me of his most perfect judgement and taste'.

Halton House, Alfred's Buckinghamshire estate shortly after completion.



Minister Rosebery to frame a second Treasury Minute two years later, however, he became a central and controversial one. The 'Rosebery Minute' of 1894 redefined the Trustee/Director relationship, curtailing the latter's power to buy on his own authority and increasing the Board's power. Alfred candidly admitted at a board meeting that this had been his idea, that 'the change in the terms of the Director's appointment had been suggested by himself after consultation with Lord Rosebery'.¹⁵ Three years later at the Wallace Collection Alfred and his fellow Trustees similarly succeeded in convincing Downing Street to restrict the powers of the first Keeper, the critic Claude Phillips.¹⁶

The appointment in 1894 of E.J. Poynter to the now much-weakened Directorship drew a line under a particularly difficult selection process, which had seen Poynter's claims as a practising artist pitted against the scholarly ones of Sidney Colvin, Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. The knowledge of foreign galleries and history vaunted by Colvin was derided as 'archaeological criticism' or 'mere antiquarianism' by opponents, who included leading artists such as Holman Hunt and Burne Jones.¹⁷ The new scholarship's basis on German foundations made it seem part of a foreign plot to replace connoisseur values with a pseudo-scientific discipline that mingled dry theory with a weakness for the latest artistic fads. At a time when the 'New Art Criticism' of D.S. MacColl and Frank Rutter was helping to fuel interest in shocking new phenomena such as Impressionism and Whistler's 'arrangements', faddism was a serious charge indeed.

Alfred followed up the Minute with a series of campaigns that made it next to impossible for Directors to continue filling 'gaps' as Eastlake had done. Between 1895 and 1902 he regularly attacked Poynter's acquisition of what he saw as a series of overpriced works by secondary masters.¹⁸ This despite the fact that he was often physically absent from meetings. His ability to make his views known even at a distance was based partly on a series of strongly-worded, professionally printed memoranda, which he first sprung on the Board in 1897. These connoisseurial manifestoes were rammed home by his allies on the board, above all Lord Redesdale and the 5th Marquis of Lansdowne, whose pro-German foreign policy views made him a natural partner. These fellow Trustees also made life difficult for Poynter, publishing their own broadsides and further restricting his powers by the 'Lansdowne Resolutions' of 1902. That Poynter was able to remain as Director until 1904 in the face of Rothschild's campaign was largely due to the continued support of a renegade Trustee, the 9th Earl of Carlisle. Poynter's successor, Charles Holroyd, broke down under the strain, as Rothschild's arrogance was compounded by the arrival on the board of Curzon, a famously proud aristocrat who plumed himself on his eye for administrative detail and who shared Alfred's low opinion of Holroyd.

Alfred's petulant opposition to the acquisition of works by less renowned masters gave way

to enthusiasm, generosity and inventiveness when it was a question of scraping together funds to secure the limited number of first-rate masterpieces he thought the Gallery should concentrate on. In 1909 Rothschild expressed his support for the idea of a Reserve Purchase Fund. He also drafted a letter that he suggested could be sent to the owners of key masterpieces, asking them to give the Gallery first refusal in event of a sale. Both were ideas considered by the 1913 Curzon Committee, which tackled the whole issue of art sales abroad.¹⁹ Art critics like D.S. MacColl had used the power of the press to draw public attention to the issue, and were among the founding fathers of the National Art Collections Fund established in 1903. Rothschild welcomed public participation in the ‘rescue’ campaigns organized by the NACF, which began in 1906 with that to save Velazquez’ *Rokeby Venus*.

Far from seeing them as exceptional, desperate efforts by outsiders to compensate for the failure of the Establishment to act (as MacColl and his allies did), if anything such public campaigns fuelled a certain complacency in Alfred’s thought on acquisitions policy. Together with a reassuringly high price tag, such outcry was a valuable way of checking that the Gallery was going after the right works. No expertise or powers to buy abroad were needed here. In his eagerness to keep it out of the hands of ‘so called experts’ Alfred seemed willing to outsource acquisition policy to the great British public, even if that ran the risk of pandering to public taste, rather than educating it. As he wrote to fellow Trustee Viscount D’Abernon in 1909 ‘I think that whatever the National Gallery buys ought to possess such undoubted merit and attractiveness, that the verdict of the public would be unanimous in approving of our purchases ...’²⁰ This may explain his fierce opposition to exhibiting the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist collection of Hugh Lane at the Tate. Manet and Renoir’s work, Alfred fumed, ‘would disgrace the one-armed man who chalks on the flagstones of the streets’.²¹ Here, as with his preference for ‘attractive’ women in paintings, he was guilty of failing to reconsider his own taste, or make a distinction between its demands and the wider criteria that necessarily held in considering acquisitions for a national collection.

Alfred’s disdain for the experience and knowledge of curators could take rather patronising forms. One Keeper of the Gallery who survived Alfred only to quit the Gallery in 1932 in disgust at continued Trustee arrogance was Charles Collins Baker. After his departure he passed on his recollections to his friend, the well-known critic and Keeper (1911–24) of the Wallace Collection D.S. MacColl. The following account mingles Collins Baker’s own memories with those of a predecessor, George Ambrose, providing one final insight into just how deeply etched into the Gallery’s collective consciousness this particular Trustee’s behaviour was:

Ambrose ... recounted over and over again how once A. Rothschild had turned on Hawes Turner [the Keeper], who had been sticking up for the Lane Collection, and in the presence of the rest had told him (Turner) not to go miaowing about the place like a cat: and A.de R. (to Ambrose’s great delight) had given an imitation of Hawes Turner’s voice, travestied with ‘miaows’. In no time I began to see for myself. In full meeting A.de R. referring to Holroyd, said if he were one’s butler and brought up a corked bottle of wine one would spit it out: and he gave another excellent imitation (on my right sleeve) of expelling corked wine. This was apropos of Holroyd submitting a picture which A.de R. thought ugly.

The whole atmosphere, he continued was one of ‘de haut en bas, contempt of scholarship’, meekly accepted by the staff.²²

Even after Alfred’s demise in 1918 the model of heavily ormolu’d Trusteeship he had introduced lived on until the Second World War. During the 1920s and 1930s the Board was thronged with other dandies and *incroyables* noted for their exquisite fashion and opulent entertaining. Among these was Philip Sassoon, also of Jewish extraction. Actually, Sassoon was a relative of Alfred’s; his mother Aline was born a Rothschild.



Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery (1847–1929) husband of Hannah de Rothschild.

Even after the foundation of the Courtauld Institute in 1930 ‘art history’ continued to elicit widespread suspicion. Connoisseurship, high prices and popular appeal continued to define the sort of art that ‘belonged’ in a national collection. High art remained yoked to prestige and wealth, the museum continued to be seen as a marble palace. This, rather than circuses or Reynolds portraits was Alfred’s legacy to the nation. For him, the museum was just another stage. Here, as at Halton, he made the butlers and the pretty ladies dance.

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NOTES

- 1 Niall Ferguson, *The World’s Banker: The History of the House of Rothschild* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p.744.
- 2 Ibid., pp.744, 750–2, 758, 767–9, 873, 921.
- 3 RAL 000/40.
- 4 Notes in Alfred’s Collector’s File in the Provenance Index at the Getty Research Institute, Malibu claim that these were in fact security for a loan. Receipts preserved in the Archive dated 1907 and 1911 suggest that the paintings might have been security for a loan between Asher Wertheimer and the 5th Baron Ashburton (Francis Denzil Baring, 1866–1938), although much remains unclear. RAL 000/174B, ff.33, 40 and 54.
- 5 Telegram of 28 February 1896. National Gallery Archive [hereafter NGA], Board Minutes, 3 March 1896.
- 6 Nicholas D. de Rothschild, ‘Alfred de Rothschild and the “R” Style’, (unpublished University of Cambridge BA Thesis, 1973), Rothschild Archive, 000/258. I am grateful to the author for kindly allowing me to consult this work, which I found most useful in preparing this piece.
- 7 Alfred de Rothschild to C.H. Collins Baker, 22 June 1916. NGA, NG26/101.
- 8 See *Report of Committee appointed by the Treasury to consider the housing of the collection of ... the late Lady Wallace* Cmnd. 8445 (1897), esp. Q229 and Q250. For the electroliers, see Wallace Collection Archives [hereafter WCA], Board Minutes, 1 May 1900. For reactions to gilding, see National Archives of Scotland, GD510/1/45 and Glasgow University Library, MacColl Papers, 5451. The Wallace Board Minutes show Alfred attending regularly, proposing ways of advertising the collection, introducing refreshment facilities and extending the hours.
- 9 ‘I should doubly prize the little picture’, Alfred wrote, ‘as having belonged to a gentleman, who by his exquisite taste and unbounded popularity so well deserves to be the possessor of the finest collection of works of art in the world.’ Alfred de Rothschild to Sir Richard Wallace, 31 March 1875. WCA, AR2/251.
- 10 Alfred left this work to the National Gallery at his death. One Director of the Gallery (Sir Charles Holmes) would later express disappointment that Alfred chose to leave the rest of his collection (along with the Halton Estate) to his nephew, Lionel Nathan de Rothschild, who sold most of it off. It was, he said, a cautionary tale against appointing millionaires as Trustees in the hope that they would make large bequests. But full-length Reynolds portraits were at the top of the market at the time. Seen in this light, the bequest hardly seems stingy. Holmes to Curzon, 21 March 1921. British Library, Oriental and India Office Library, MSS EUR F112/58.
- 11 A transcript of the book is available at The Rothschild Archive.
- 12 For the hens, see Mrs Lionel de Rothschild’s recollections, recorded in 1970 as part of Nicholas de Rothschild’s researches into Alfred’s taste. RAL 000/258.
- 13 Ferguson, *The World’s Banker*, p.859.
- 14 See William Gregory to Alfred de Rothschild, 24 June 1884. RAL 000/182, f.1.
- 15 NGA, Trustee Minutes, 4 February 1896. Some credit should also go to a Treasury official, G.H. Murray, who clearly played an equally important role in framing the minute. See his memo of 30 March 1894. National Library of Scotland, Rosebery Papers, 10150, f.186.
- 16 Although some officials were on Phillips’ side, they did little to support him. See the correspondence of Phillips and Bernard Mallet in WCA, AR50/D.
- 17 See Carlisle to Gladstone, 19 February 1894. National Library of Scotland, Rosebery Papers, 10150, f.110. The same volume contains many other letters on the issue from Burne Jones, Holman Hunt, Charles Fairfax Murray, Lord Leighton and others. See also Alan Bell, ‘Colvin vs. Poynter: the directorship of the National Gallery, 1892–4’, in *Connoisseur* (December 1975), pp.278–83. While not opposed to Poynter, Alfred’s preferred candidate was Walter Armstrong, Director of the National Gallery of Ireland.
- 18 For examples of Alfred’s opposition to specific pictures brought forward for consideration by Poynter see NGA, Trustee Minutes, 10 December 1895 (over Parmigiano from Scarpa Collection, Milan), 14 April 1896 (over an ‘ugly’ Bronzino) and 1 June 1897 (over Bettes’ *Portrait of a Man* and Masolino *Christ Among the Doctors*). See Poynter to George Howard, 2 May 1896. Castle Howard, Papers of the 9th Earl of Carlisle, J22/57. For Holroyd’s reaction to similar resistance, see BL, Oriental and India Office Library, MSS EUR F112/57.
- 19 NGA, Trustee Minutes, 7 July 1909. Alfred clearly disagreed with the 1913 Curzon Reports findings. His initial refusal to sign the report made difficulties for Curzon. BL, Oriental and India Office Library, MSS EUR F112/62.
- 20 Alfred de Rothschild to D’Abernon, 5 November 1909. RAL 000/182, f.23
- 21 Alfred de Rothschild, printed memo, n.d. BL, Oriental and India Office Library, MSS EUR F112/64.
- 22 George E. Ambrose served as Clerk from 1878 to 1897 and Chief Clerk from 1897–1914; Hawes Turner was Keeper from 1898 until 1914. Collins Baker, ‘Reflections and conclusions as regards the N.G.’ n.d.. Glasgow University Library, D.S. MacColl Papers, B18. The episodes described must predate 1914.