

Collecting Chardins: Charlotte and Henri de Rothschild

Harry W. Paul analyses the significance of the collecting tastes of two members of the Rothschild family in France.

It is often convenient to begin Rothschildian history in biblical fashion, establishing who begat whom. Take, for example, a sub-group of the French tribe during the last 150 years or so. Philippe de Rothschild (1902–1988) is known because of his prominence in ‘the civilisation of wine’ and his prowess as a translator of English poetry and theatre, including the work of Christopher Fry. His father, Henri (1872–1947), a significant figure in Parisian medicine and a prolific writer whose plays enjoyed a brief success in Paris and London, is, however, often relegated to *opéra comique* status. Henri’s father, James-Edouard (1844–1881) is a practically unknown figure. James Edouard’s father, Nathaniel, often gets mentioned in books on wine because of his English roots and for his savvy purchase of the Mouton vineyard (Pauillac) in 1853, three years before his father-in-law, James (1792–1868), managed also to become the complete Parisian banker by acquiring the Lafite domain. The marriage of Nathaniel to Charlotte (1825–1899), daughter of Betty (1805–1886) and James (*le grand baron*) had a considerable cultural influence in French artistic and bibliophilic history, especially through Charlotte, her son James Edouard, and her grandson Henri. After a few words on ‘La bibliothèque Henri de Rothschild’, this article will deal with one aspect of that influence, namely the collecting by Charlotte and Henri of paintings by the great French artist Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779).

James Edouard earned a law degree and enjoyed legal culture, especially forensic medicine; he even practised law for a few lucky clients who got his services free of charge. Family pressure, especially that of his mother, drove him reluctantly into the bank after the death of his father. Though interested in many things, including medicine – he founded a children’s hospital at Berck-sur-Mer – his great passion was early French literature and the collection of the works of its literary stars; and of course for this type of collection the books, in their famous

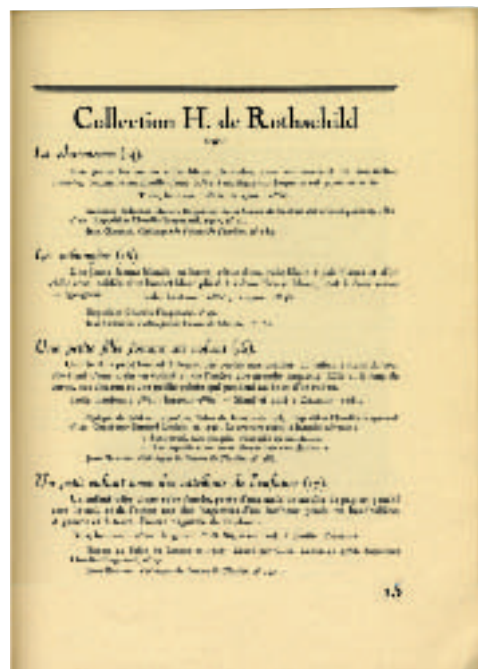


Henri de Rothschild;
Charlotte, Baroness
Nathaniel de Rothschild.
The Rothschild Archive.

bindings, had to be in as perfect condition as possible. His widow, Laura-Thérèse (1847–1931), and Henri greatly increased the size of the library. In 1933 Henri, fearing that the famous library might not survive intact after his death, decided, in ‘a *geste* of solidarity’ with the French nation, to donate the books along with his famous collection of autographs to the Bibliothèque nationale, where it now sits in its own room complete with wainscoting from Rothschild residences. The library celebrated this ‘royal gift’ to the state with an exposition, whose opening was attended by some leading politicians and by numerous journalists. *Le tout Paris* was on hand to hear Henri’s being hailed as a French Morgan; here at least was one collection that would not cross the Atlantic. (Neither would it become a Rothschild version of the Morgan Library, whose private-public nature was not appealing to the French *étatiste* cultural mentality.)

Among the disasters suffered by Henri during World War II, one of the most aesthetically distressing was the loss of a dozen or so paintings by Chardin that had been sent to England for safekeeping. The paintings were destroyed in a flood; it might have wiser to have left them in Paris to be stolen by the Germans and then, possibly, the Russians, who carted off Henri’s surviving papers from Germany and eventually sent them to The Rothschild Archive in London. In 1931 the Henri de Rothschild collection of Chardin’s works included thirty-three paintings, one pastel, and a drawing. Most of the works were shown at the Georges Petit Gallery in June 1907. Henri owned some great Chardins: *le Volant*, *le Singe peintre*, *la Lessive*, *L’Enfant au tambour de basque*, *la Fillette*, and *la Femme au serin*, which was considered by some people to be ‘the pearl of the group’. All of the collection was shown during October 1929 at Henri’s gallery (Galerie Pigalle), on the ground floor of his newly opened theatre.¹ This ‘Exposition Chardin’ provided the occasion for Henri and Philippe to inaugurate the art gallery. It may be assumed that the founders of a theatre notorious for its stage machinery and lighting, which they hoped would have a critical impact on contemporary theatre, also hoped that their exhibition in the theatre would somehow connect their innovations with the great artistic traditions. Except in the context of a sort of cultural smorgasbord, the idea did not succeed in promoting a new concept of theatre in Paris. The Chardin show was another matter.

The baroness Nathaniel (Charlotte) had put together the basic collection of Rothschild Chardins in the second half of the nineteenth century. Hot-housed into high European culture



Pages from the catalogue *Exposition des œuvres de J.B.S. Chardin (1699–1779)*, produced by the Galerie Pigalle, 1929. The page on the right hand side features the entry for the picture *Girl with a shuttlecock* (illustration page 24). The Rothschild Archive.



Henri's former Paris townhouse, the château de la Muette, and a detail from the entrance, after the property was acquired by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

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by her father and mother James and Betty, Charlotte blossomed into one of the leading bourgeois patrons of nineteenth-century culture. Chopin, from whom she took piano lessons in 1839, dedicated waltzes and ballades to her. After extensive restoration work on the ruins of the Cistercian abbey in Vaux-de-Cernay, her residence there became, in Roche's words, a music salon with a piano for an altar.² The musical gene was not passed on to Henri, who described himself as a 'melophobe'. At the abbey Charlotte had a reputation for receiving not only royals and aristocrats but also artists – Corot, Rousseau, and Manet – and musicians – Bizet and Saint-Saëns. The great Scribe also came. Fifty or so of the paintings (including works by Boucher, Tiepolo, van Dyck, La Tour, and Boilly) that Henri later installed in La Muette – his new château, now the home of the OECD, near the Bois de Boulogne – were collected by Charlotte between 1860 and 1898. It has been said that Nathaniel was not excessively fond of paintings, which he compared to women: everyone must please himself and pick them according to his own tastes. This appears to be a misleading aesthetic judgment on Nathaniel, at least concerning paintings. Henri's uncle Edmond (1845–1934), noted that Nathaniel collected a group of Dutch paintings, Sèvres vases, and furniture, including two 'magnificent commodes de Boule', which were later installed in the library of the residence of James-Edouard and Laura-Thérèse at 42 avenue de Friedland.³ If Chardin's paintings were, as is sometimes said, in the Dutch naturalistic tradition of the seventeenth century, then the tastes of Charlotte and Nathaniel (and Henri) had a certain area of agreement. With Henri's additions, it might be said that no one else had 'a collection [of Chardins] of such quality', so varied as to give an idea of the range of work of the artist.⁴ A unique collection and therefore one that conformed to the old Rothschild aim of achieving aesthetic (and social) greatness in collecting.

A well-known artist herself, Charlotte painted landscapes, did watercolours and engravings. She studied with Ercole Trachel and Nélie Jacquemart. (With her banker husband, Nélie formed the collection, including two Chardins, now in the Jacquemart-André museum, originally their residence, which they gave to the Institut de France.) After 1864 Charlotte exhibited at the annual Salon des aquarellistes français. The entry for Charlotte in the Bénézit – getting a good entry here is a significant achievement – praises her fine talent and sensitivity, though it relegates her to the status of a very distinguished amateur rather than putting her in a professional category.⁵ This amateur enjoyed a respectable professional success, showing her work in London in 1879 and achieving a minor immortality in the Musée du Luxembourg as well as museums in Sceaux, Bayonne, Nice, Tourcoing, Beaufort, Angers, and Rouen. In public sales between 1881 and 1898 her watercolours sold for between a high of 1450 and a low of 260 francs, the latter being about a fifth of the usual price for her work. When Charlotte showed her *Oignons du Midi* in the salon of 1872, *Le Grelot* flattered the 'aquarelliste d'élite', with a satire.

Charlotte's collections, which were brought together at her residence in the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré were divided among her heirs on her death in 1899. Henri did very well, acquiring French works of the eighteenth century – Chardin, Boucher, Rouais, and Lépicié. Charlotte, a third generation Rothschild was culturally French in a certain 'ethnic' way, unlike her parents, great patrons of the arts though they were; she certainly reinforced her French identity by building this particular collection, though other factors have to be considered in the complex business of acquiring a great art collection. Betty de Rothschild was very fond of Henri: she bought him the *Molière de Boucher* with the original drawings and all the versions (états) of the engravings. Henri also inherited from the family many original drawings, including illustrations of La Fontaine's works. Henri's sister Jeanne was consoled with paintings by Frans Hals and Francesco Guardi. Charlotte added significantly to the *patrimoine national* with a gift to the Louvre of fourteen Italian paintings and the famous *Laitière* by Greuze, which her father had bought in 1819 and she had inherited. Henri added some Chardins, including the *Jenne fille au volant* (see illustration, page 24) and *le Lièvre*, to his collection in a gallery at his château de La Muette.

Chardin died in 1779; so collections of his works received big shows at the end of decades:

1929, 1979, and 1999 make up a famous trinity. Hoping to make a big splash worthy of ‘un pantoufflard parisien nommé Chardin’, Henri and Philippe asked French and foreign museums for loans of some works.⁶ Support came from the administration of French national museums, the Prussian education and fine arts department, and several private French collectors, including David Weill and Georges Wildenstein. Thirty-eight paintings, one pastel, and a drawing by Chardin along with thirty-two engravings by artists of the caliber of Lépicié were put on display. (The Chardin show at the Grand Palais in 1999 offered ninety six pictures to viewers.) A famous scribbler of the day, André Maurois, wrote the preface to the catalogue. Philippe personally supervised all the preparations for the show and outlined the programme. Friends and supporters in government and high places came to the show; true, they went to many shows in the course of routine duty, but Chardin exercised a special French cultural attraction for them and the Rothschilds. Poncet, undersecretary of state in the ministry of beaux-arts, and Paul Léon, chief executive officer (*directeur général*) of the beaux-arts bureaucracy, opened the show. At the end of November big politicians showed up, including the minister of education and the president of the republic, Gaston Doumergue. Guided by Philippe, the president spent some time scrutinising pictures and engravings. It is striking evidence of the success of the Rothschild ‘Exposition Chardin’ that more than fifty articles on the show appeared in the French and foreign press.⁷

Why this particular attachment of Henri – and probably Charlotte and her great-grandson Philippe – to Chardin, ‘the poet of the French bourgeoisie’ as well as ‘the first Frenchman who looked at nature with modern eyes’.⁸ Two good reasons right there, one might say. (Philippe published a fair amount of poetry, including verse on vine and wine, some of which is seductively good.) Pierre Rosenberg pointed out that it is difficult to pigeonhole Chardin, for each age ‘has seen him with its own sensitivity ... and has loved him in its own fashion’.⁹ What makes Chardin a great painter? Assuming a universal, persistent aesthetic objectivity, Rosenberg claims that it is ‘the voluptuousness, tenderness, and the gravity which set Chardin apart and place him in the ranks of the great painters’.¹⁰ After his death in 1779 Chardin entered into a half-century or so of relative neglect, being ‘rediscovered’ about the middle of the nineteenth century. Charlotte may be placed among a significant number of artists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who owned works by Chardin.¹¹ The artists knew better than the historians, who soon

Below, left
Girl with a shuttlecock,
 Jean Siméon Chardin, 1737,
 oil on canvas.
 Private collection.

Below, right
The cut melon,
 Jean Siméon Chardin, 1760,
 oil on canvas.
 Private collection.





Jean Siméon Chardin,
The Silver Tureen, 1728, oil
 on canvas. (76.2 x 108cm).
 The Metropolitan Museum
 of Art, Fletcher Fund,
 1959 (59.9).
 Photograph © 1998
 The Metropolitan
 Museum of Art.

caught up, however. Henri's taste was, to some extent, determined by what was in the family. Perhaps the hardcore Parisian who 'virtually never left his native city' but managed to turn out 'the least "Parisian" paintings of the entire [eighteenth] century' had a special attraction for Henri, often described as the quintessential Parisian.¹² Henri's persona is, of course, quite different from what we know of Chardin's, but both were proudly Parisian, nevertheless. Both men belong to that nebulous social category we call the bourgeoisie. It may be that the genre scenes painted by Chardin – 'the finest images we have of the industrious and upright bourgeoisie of the artist's time' – provided an icon for the family, many of whom have worshipped work.¹³ An added virtue was that the icon was famously French.

Another medical man had collected Chardins: the art collection of William Hunter (1718–83) included three of the artist's works, now in the Hunterian Art Gallery in Glasgow. It would be stretching things a bit to try to see a special attraction of medical men to Chardin, though his social realism was certainly appealing to Henri, whose vast medical charity in Paris was based on his knowledge of the harsh living conditions of the city's population, especially its women and children. Henri once owned eight of the paintings in the exhibition of 1979. A few had also been kept in the family. The painting of the blind man (*l'Aveugle des Quinze-Vingts*) had been bought by Charlotte in 1886 and passed on to Henri. Nathaniel had gone blind before his death; the subject matter must have been doubly interesting to Henri, physician and hospital builder, both as a portrait of a common medical condition and as a reference to the hospital Quinze-Vingts (15 x 20), founded by Saint Louis for 300 blind persons. Chardin's interest in portraying natural philosophers (*les Attributs de la science*, 1731; *un Chimiste dans son laboratoire* or *le Souffleur*, 1734) as well as his *les Aliments de la convalescence*, 1746/7 link Chardin vaguely to the world of science. His famous monkey painter unfortunately had no companion monkey

doctor, who might have illustrated Henri's denunciations of medical charlatans over two centuries later.¹⁴ Chardin painted many creatures killed by hunters. This fact no doubt did not escape Henri, a devotee of the hunt with all its rituals and traditions.¹⁵ Many paintings, many fantasies, and much on the canvases to bond the works to the lucky owner.

The exegesis of Henri's love of Chardin is susceptible of much speculation, not all of which is farfetched. In the end it may be best to remember what he inherited and his interest in adding to his collection of the works of an artist who more than anyone showed 'the originality and greatness of French eighteenth-century painting'.¹⁶ The Rothschilds collected great art, and the fact that an artist was French was an advantage for French Rothschilds in doing their bit to preserve the *patrimoine* and in showing their aesthetic patriotism, especially for Henri in an age that was showing its anti-Semitic teeth.

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A receipt for a Chardin bought by Charlotte in the last year of her life.
RAL 000/929: OE448

NOTES

- 1 Philippe Chauveau, *Les Théâtres parisiens disparus 1402–1986* (Paris: Les Editions de l'Amandier, 1999). The theatre closed in 1948 and was replaced by a garage ten years later.
- 2 François Roche, *Les Rothschild à l'abbaye des Vaux de Cernay*, La vallée de Chevreuse en 1900 ... à travers les cartes postales, no.7 (Paris: I.D.C. plus, n.d.).
- 3 Pauline Prévost Marilhac, 'Hôtel Nathaniel de Rothschild', in *Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré*, eds. Béatrice de Andia and Dominique Fernandès (Paris: Délégation à l'action artistique de la Ville de Paris, 1994), pp.119–124; The Rothschild Archive London (RAL), 000/930: 58–1, 172–182. Edmond's comment on Nathaniel found in RAL 000/930: 58–1, 140. The residence at 42 avenue de Friedland has been replaced by a modern building.
- 4 André Pascal and Roger Gaucheron, eds., *Documents sur la vie et l'œuvre de Chardin* (Paris: Editions de la Galerie Pigalle, 1931).
- 5 E. Bénézit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs dessinateurs et graveurs*, rev. ed. (Paris: Gründ, 1999).
- 6 Geneviève Breerette, 'La main géniale d'un pantoufflard parisien nommé Chardin', *Le Monde* (10 September 1999), p.28.
- 7 Pascal and Gaucheron
- 8 In *La Croix* and *Le Populaire*, see Pascal and Gaucheron, section on press coverage.
- 9 Pierre Rosenberg, *Chardin 1699–1779* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art in cooperation with Indiana University Press, 1979), p.61.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.61.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.73.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.43.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.37.
- 14 Henri de Rothschild, *Le médecin dans la société contemporaine. Conférence à la salle des agriculteurs le 2 mars 1911* (Paris: L. Carteret, 1911).
- 15 See Georges Benoist, *Grandes chasses, grands fusils* (Paris: S.A.D.E.I., 1952).
- 16 Rosenberg, p.73.