

## Chapter XIV — John Bell's collection.

Very little is known about the origins of John Bell's collection. Our main sources of knowledge on the collection are some of the sale catalogues of 1881, preserved In the Glasgow Room of the Mitchell Library, (93) the sederunt book of John Bell's sequestration, Fleming's "Scottish Pottery" and other writings and an obituary notice in the Evening Citizen. (94)

From the Sederunt Book comes the interesting piece of information that John Bell kept a collection of porcelain and pottery from many English and European sources at the Glasgow Pottery for the use of the designers. (95)

Whether this was the origin of his collecting or a consequence of it is a moot point. It was not sold up with the rest of the collection on John Bell's death. From the same source we have a list of the dealers from whom John Bell purchased works. These are: —

Thomas Lawrie & Son, Glasgow  
 Colin Rae Brown, London  
 Lesser Lesser, London  
 Benjamin Benjamin, London  
 Thomas Burgess, Dublin

This is a list of the dealers to whom his estate owed money at his death and may not be a complete list of those he bought from.

However it was in its origins, the main collection was extremely ambitious and reflects an urgent desire on the part of John Bell to put together an important collection of all the things that he thought beautiful. Before going any further however, it is necessary to deal with a persistent rumour that the collection was full of fakes and that John Bell never made a will leaving his collection to Glasgow because Glasgow Corporation members had laughed at his collection for this reason.

For the last assertion I can find no evidence apart from Fleming's writings. For the business of fakes it is only perhaps necessary to point out that the collection, according to the catalogues preserved in the Mitchell Library in Glasgow made over £50,000 when auctioned and that the collection of catalogues is not complete, there having been at least one sale in Edinburgh for which no catalogue is extant. While the catalogues claim that John Bell spent over £200,000 on amassing his collection, no authority is given for this and it would be well to take it with more than a grain of salt. More profoundly, some of the criticism comes from a lack of understanding of collectors of the period.

That not every collector could afford a Leonardo goes without saying. Nowadays one buys a large colour reproduction of one's favourite but in the middle of the nineteenth century this was not possible. The less affluent bought an engraving, the more affluent hired one of the army of copyists who haunted every large collection to paint a life-size copy which he then referred to as "my Leonardo". It would be catalogued as such but no one would for a moment think that it was an original by the artist himself, nor was it meant to deceive anyone. Many famous artists, including Turner, Whistler and Van Gogh, have painted copies for their own use. It is noticeable that when the experts were going through John Bell's collection after his death they distinguish three categories of pictures: originals, copies and fakes. The fakes are by far the smallest category and even they are given some value: the copies are considered quite valuable though they are auctioned in Glasgow rather than in London. We must take into account also the state of the art market in recent years, a unique phenomenon. Only in the last thirty years or so have

collectors expected to buy a picture and find that it has doubled in value in five or ten years. In the nineteenth connoisseurs bought pictures to enjoy, not simply as an extension of their business activities. They did not expect to sell a picture after a few years and make a profit. Prices at this time also were not what they subsequently became. For instance in 1869 John Bowes, founder of the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle, paid only £8 for a masterpiece by El Greco, which hangs in the Museum till this day. This probably included the dealer's premium for negotiating with the original owner. It is also important to remember that John Bell's was not simply a collection of paintings and no one has ever questioned the value of its other categories. We must accept that Glasgow is the poorer for not having inherited the works in North Park House and, if Arnold Fleming's story is true, the scoffers have much to answer for.

The principal categories that John Bell collected include paintings, sculptures, porcelain and earthenware, and books but there are also zoological, geological and archaeological specimens, snuff boxes, camei, jewellery, furniture and much more. He is said by Fleming to have taken good advice before buying but the collection does not simply reflect the taste of the day but shows a guiding mind and an individual taste behind it and it is difficult to believe that these do not belong to John Bell. The number of Guido Renis, as well as Rubens, Poussins and Murillos show the taste of the time but the presence of Botticellis in some numbers and Massys and Mabuse exhibit a distinct individuality whether the paintings be copies or originals. The Pre-Raphaelites had had their effect on taste, though they, along with most other modern painters, were missing from the catalogue.

Italian and Dutch paintings were obviously the favourites while Scottish and English pictures were very poorly represented, the former mainly by historical portraits and the latter landscapes. Besides the oil painting of Emma Bell there were drawings by Sir Daniel Macnee of John Bell's parents; either of these would be of great interest if they could be found and identified.

The pottery in the collection comes as a shock to anyone who collects the products of the Glasgow Pottery. In John Bell's time these latter are not over elaborate in the Victorian mode, or seldom so; so that the fact that his favourite Potteries were Sevres and Meissen seems almost a contradiction. However that may be, John Bell's taste was extremely marked.

Porcelain was his great passion and in the makers of porcelain Sévres and Meissen (or Dresden) were his favourites. He had no less than 144 pieces of Sévres and over 100 pieces of Meissen. Vienna, Royal Berlin and Capo di Monte came far behind, all showing less than 40 pieces. Of the British potteries Wedgwood was the most popular with over 30 pieces, with basalt being especially favoured. Caughley, Meyer, Spode, Coleport, Davenport, Minton, Worcester, Copeland, Crown Derby, Nantgarw, Chelsea and Belleek are all represented, though mostly only by a few pieces. Chinese and Japanese pots were present in some number. The only pieces which were at all likely to have come from the Glasgow Pottery itself are two Parian copies of the Warwick Vase which sold for 76/- and which could well be the pieces now in Glasgow Art Gallery and the Paisley Museum. There were two Parian vases on stands which sold for 4/6, perhaps some of the ones shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851. There were some pieces of maiolica as well as two Della Robbia busts ("rare and antique") and one plaque.

The sculpture contained Roman busts, Renaissance bronzes and marbles, one piece by Canova, Japanese and French bronzes as well as 32 pieces labelled mysteriously 'from the antique'.

The geological and zoological collection was never considered to be on a par with Matthew's or their cousin John Gorse Glen's but was nevertheless of importance.

The furniture tended to be either massive and European, or “Elizabethan”, though there was some Indian furniture, so common in Victorian middle class homes; indeed, Matthew had had some Indian furniture also in his St Vincent St home. One often with the furniture comes across references like ‘from Linlithgow Palace’ or ‘from Falkland Palace’ enclosed in inverted commas and followed by the name of a previous collector, e.g. Paton Collection. One table is labelled “From Lord Belhaven’s Collection -presented by Louis XVI to a relative.” The furniture seems to have sold well. Similar labels on the paintings were in general of rather grander collections. From the Domville Collection or Prince Demidoff’s Collection are amongst the humblest. The labels put on some of the items in the sales, particularly the sales conducted in Glasgow are very grand indeed and, if true, show that much of the collection was of international importance. One Sévres centrepiece we are told was the favourite of the Emperor Napoleon III; an easy chair was made for the reception of George IV in Edinburgh in 1822. Paintings are ‘from Cardinal Fesch’s collection’, or the Earl of Shrewsbury’s or Marshal Soult’s, or the King of Naples’ or the Duke of Mantua’s or even Philip II’s

The jewellery, the camei, the snuff boxes, the rock crystal, the Venetian glass, the silver-gilt, the ivories, the jade, the oriental enamels, the watches and the miniatures were all sold in London and they sold well, so well that one regrets the breaking up of the collection and the fact that it did not come to Glasgow as had been said to be intended. The richness and profusion created by John Bell in his collecting would have added greatly to the importance of Glasgow’s municipal collection and must be seen as one of the greatest losses to the City in all time.

