Alice de Rothschild’s collection of arms and armour at Waddesdon Manor

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1 Waddesdon Manor, the great Rothschild house near Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire (fig. 1), is generally associated with the name of the man who built it, Ferdinand de Rothschild (1839–98), but although the house and its contents were indeed his creation, the collections were very significantly enhanced by his sister, Alice de Rothschild (1845–1922), who inherited the estate on his death. Alice, like her brother and many other members of the Rothschild family, was an active and discerning collector in her own right; this paper focuses on a particular aspect of her taste, namely for arms and armour. This was part of her interest in the material culture of the 16th and 17th centuries, but should also be seen in the context of her life and wider collecting, and the influences of the Rothschild family.¹
2 Ferdinand and Alice (fig. 2 and 3) were from the Viennese branch of the Rothschild family, two of the eight children of Anselm (1803–74) and Charlotte (1807–59). Charlotte was an English Rothschild, the daughter of Nathan Mayer (1777–1836), the founder of the London branch of the family business, so her children, particularly Ferdinand and Alice, grew up with an attachment to England, which led to Ferdinand’s decision to move to London and settle there. Ferdinand in turn moved to England and married an English cousin, Evelina, daughter of Lionel, who died in 1866. He built Waddesdon as a country retreat, a place where he could entertain friends and family through the summer and on weekends, but also as a treasure house, a setting for his growing collection. The design of Waddesdon, conceived by his French architect Gabriel-Hyppolite Destailler, was a reflection of his historical interests—an architectural echo of French 16th-century chateaux, but inside an homage to 18th-century Parisian hôtels particuliers.
Fig. 2: Alice de Rothschild as a Young Woman, c. 1865, photographic print, Aylesbury, Waddesdon, acc. no. 7310.
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Fig. 3: Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild dressed as a Renaissance prince at the Devonshire Ball, c. 1865, photographic print, Aylesbury, Waddesdon, acc. no. 3747, Gift of Dorothy de Rothschild, 1971.
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From the moment that he purchased the Waddesdon estate in 1874, Ferdinand embarked on a monumental effort to create the house and its grounds on a site on which, by his own account, “there was not a bush to be seen nor a bird to be heard” at the outset. The top of the hill was levelled, the drives and terraces excavated, water had to be piped in from Aylesbury and materials brought to site on a specially constructed tramway. Mature trees were imported to landscape the grounds and mounds; grottoes of artificial Pulham rock were constructed to house a menagerie of exotic species. Inside, the house exemplified what became known as “le goût Rothschild,” opulent interiors in which magnificent English 18th-century portraits looked down from silk or boiserie-hung walls onto the finest examples of 18th-century French marquetry furniture, Sévres and Meissen porcelain, Savonnerie carpets woven for the French royal palaces, marble and terracotta sculptures, gold boxes and other precious objects. The collection was to become famous in its owner’s lifetime.

The creation and furnishing of the Manor was witnessed by Alice, the youngest of Anselm and Charlotte’s daughters. Like her siblings, Alice’s childhood was divided between Paris, where she was born, then Vienna and Frankfort, where the roots of the family lay. Alice, like Ferdinand, spent a good deal of time with her mother’s family in England, particularly at Gunnersbury, then just outside London. She formed some exceptionally strong bonds, in particular with her cousins Constance (1843–1931) and Annie (1844–1926), daughters of her uncle Anthony (1810–76), reinforced when Alice arrived from Vienna in 1865, aged 20, to join Ferdinand in England after the death of Evelina. They lived together, first in London, where Alice bought the adjoining house to his, 142 Piccadilly, and at Leighton House in Leighton Buzzard, from where they both enjoyed hunting with the Rothschild stag hounds. The death of their father, Anselm, in 1874 left them both independently wealthy, and Ferdinand started to look for a country house. Opportunely, the Waddesdon estate came on the market the same year, so Ferdinand bought it, and then set about building the Manor.

The following year, the adjoining estate at Eythrope, bordering the River Thame, was also acquired, and then passed on to Alice, who had the existing house demolished and rebuilt by a local architect, George Devey. It was a day residence only. After a bout of rheumatic fever, she preferred not to sleep by water, so Ferdinand provided her with a bedroom and sitting room at Waddesdon. She divided her time between London and Buckinghamshire from 1880 onwards, when the first part of the Manor, the Bachelors’ Wing, was ready for occupation. This year was marked by the first of her brother’s many Saturday-to-Monday house parties, which became legendary in their day for luxury and hospitality. Guests, who included the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII), described sumptuous meals, cooked by Ferdinand’s French chef, and visits to the gardens, the aviary, the dairy (where they could taste the milk and cream), the glass houses and the water garden. Alice would often take the whole party across the estate to Eythrope, where they would admire the gardens and have tea in a river-side pavilion with a mosaic floor.

Alice’s forceful, not to say formidable, personality was laced with great charm and intelligence, and this, combined with their closeness, must have made Alice the obvious choice to inherit the estate on Ferdinand’s death. Life at Waddesdon under Alice followed a familiar pattern. She continued to host house parties, although only twice a year. Guests, who included Sir Winston Churchill, Lord Kitchener, and Henry James, enjoyed every possible luxury, although some visitors found their hostess could be both
intimidating and a little strange. Ottoline Morrell, who visited in 1909, later described Alice as "a lonely old oddity." Even Edward VII, who made a nostalgic visit to his old friend's house in 1906, was famously told to keep his hands off the furniture. This concern to protect the collection was manifested in what became known later as “Miss Alice’s Rules,” which remain a significant force in the management of the collection to this day.

Alice’s presence during the formation of her brother’s collection must have been a major influence on her own taste, brought to bear in her own houses in London and Eythrope while Ferdinand was alive, but more energetically after his death. She must also have known other Rothschild family collections such as those of her uncle Lionel (1808–79) and aunt Charlotte (1818–74) and of her cousin Alfred (1842–1918). She may also have been aware of the collections of other Rothschilds who collected in the field—particularly that of her brother-in-law Adolphe Carl (1823–1900) from the Naples branch who had married her elder sister Caroline Julie Anselme (known as Julie—1830–1907). Both Adolphe and Julie were keen collectors, for their Parisian hotel on the rue Monceau, and for their country house at Pregny on Lake Geneva. She may also have known the arms and armour collection of Baron Salomon (1835–64), displayed by his widow Adèle in her house on rue Berryer. She would also have come into contact with connoisseurs outside the family circle. She knew the famous collection assembled by the Marquis of Hertford and Sir Richard Wallace (now the Wallace Collection), and is recorded in the Visitors’ Book there with Ferdinand in 1885. In most respects, her taste followed familial lines. A rare early colour view of her sitting room at the Manor, taken around 1910 (fig. 4), shows an interior with a Savonnerie carpet on the floor, red-silk hung walls, densely hung with a variety of works on paper, including four of the original drawings by Moreau le Jeune for the famous edition of the *Monument du costume* made between 1775 and 1783. There are garnitures of Sèvres porcelain, sculpture and on one wall, a magnificent gilt-bronze-mounted commode by Jean-Henri Riesener, made in 1776 for Louis XVI’s sister-in-law, the Comtesse de Provence, bought via the dealer Wertheimer for £2,310 as early as 1882, at a time when Ferdinand was making some of his most important purchases.
However, some of her collecting was much less typical, perhaps partly explained by her independent outlook. The fact that she focussed on arms and armour is in itself unusual, aligning with the collection of pipes and matchboxes which she assembled in her villa in Grasse. Both of these would have been seen as largely masculine areas for collecting in the late 19th century.
One of the most important elements of the Waddesdon collection was what Ferdinand referred to as his “Renaissance Museum,” the 16th and 17th-century ivory, Limoges enamels, goldsmiths’ work, maiolica, glass and rock crystal, a 19th-century equivalent of a princely Kunstкамmer. This collection, displayed in the Smoking Room in the Bachelors’ Wing, was bequeathed in its entirety to the British Museum on Ferdinand’s death in 1898, where it remains as the Waddesdon Bequest. Alice was his executor, and so it fell to her to organise the transfer. The departure of the bequest led to a collecting opportunity for Alice, which she approached in a methodical way, both to preserve the existing character of the Bachelors’ Wing and the collections it had contained and to exercise her own taste for such objects. It was this project which created the impetus for the arms and armour acquisitions. The documentary sources are incomplete, but a number of receipts for works of art do survive, for acquisitions largely made between 1904 and 1922, slowing after the outbreak of the First World War, and then resuming at a slower pace in 1918. These record a number of purchases of arms, alongside enamels, maiolica, Sèvres, gold boxes and paintings. Some of the major names of the commercial art world in London, Frankfurt and Berlin are represented, including Wertheimer, 21 Norfolk St, London, and Harding, St James’s Square, and the picture dealers Charles Davis and Colnaghi, but the largest suppliers of objects for the Bachelors’ Wing were the furniture, porcelain and objets d’art specialist Durlacher Brothers, of 142 New Bond Street London, Seligmann and J&A Goldschmidt, with receipts from their London, Paris and Frankfurt businesses.

Alice did not start completely from scratch in her collecting of arms. Ferdinand had also embellished the Bachelors’ Wing with a small collection—his probate inventory, taken in 1898, lists “trophies of arms and various articles on the Walls” displayed in
what was then called the Billiard Room Corridor, the main access to the Bachelors’ Wing from the main house, and which led to both the Billiard and Smoking Rooms. The exact number of pieces is not known, but some at least remain at the Manor. They include a collection of early 17th-century possibly Netherlandish and Swiss halberds, French 18th-century pistols and a group of knives. There is also a *piqué* powder flask from the Spitzer Collection, which in 1898 was in Ferdinand’s private sitting room, where he had other *piqué* and gold boxes. Whether Alice took these categories of pieces as a guide or not, she built on these foundations, because the collection as it stood when she died consisted of mainly 16th and 17th-century pieces, in particular swords, daggers, firearms and powder flasks. As Claude Blair says, the emphasis was on their decorative qualities, rather than their history, chronology or typology. They come mainly from the great European centres of production in Italy, Germany, Austria, the Low Countries, France and Britain. Although several pieces have illustrious provenances, this does not appear to have been a major motivation. Like Ferdinand, she generally did not keep records of where she was acquiring the pieces (apart from the receipts mentioned above, which seem to have survived accidentally), but she made a few notes on provenance in a set of manuscript notes entitled “Catalogue of the Principle Pictures etc.”

She seems to have largely bought privately, rather than at auction. Some pieces came from major late 19th and early 20th-century collections, such as Spitzer Collection and the sales of the merchant and collector of medieval art, Hollingsworth Magniac (1786–1867), and the collector Richard Zschille (1847–1903). But the main influence on the formation of the collection was Sir Guy Francis Laking, Bart., one of the foremost connoisseurs of arms and armour of the time.

Laking was one of the most prominent, intriguing and colourful personalities of the early 20th-century art market. He was born in 1875, the son of Sir Francis Laking, physician to the Royal Household. He therefore had close connections to the royal family from an early age, which greatly helped him in his later career. He was passionate about arms and armour from boyhood, and by the time he was 21, was acting as an Art Advisor for Christie’s. In 1900, at age 24, he was appointed Honorary Inspector of the Armouries at the Wallace Collection, then two years later, King Edward VII created the post of Keeper of the King’s Armoury at Windsor especially for him. Later on, from 1911 to 1919, he was instrumental in setting up the London Museum (now the Museum of London), becoming its first Keeper. In 1920–22, he published an immense and seminal work, based on the Royal collections, *A Record of European Armour and Arms through Seven Centuries*, in five volumes. All of this demonstrates the level and extent of his scholarship, but also the extraordinarily high regard in which he was held.

He was also legendary for his charm—he seems to have been loved by almost everyone who knew him, not least by women—his great kindness, immense generosity and wild extravagance. He was renowned for his expensive tastes, which extended to his personal collection of arms and armour, and his lavish parties. Famously, he entertained the members of the Meyrick Society, established in honour of the arms and armour collector and Antiquary, Sir Samuel Rush Meyrick, to a medieval feast at his home which featured a banquet with a roast peacock in its feathers and his children’s governess dressed up in armour, handing around a loving cup. He had a penchant for dressing up and taking part in mock tournaments, taking the role of
Esquire of the Knight Martiall of the Lists in a tournament he helped to organise as part of “The Triumph Holden at Shakespeare’s England,” a medieval pageant and extravaganza which took place in London at Earl’s Court to great acclaim in 1912.17

However, this celebrity lifestyle meant that Laking was generally living beyond his means. His friend the journalist and heraldic scholar Oswald Barron wrote that “he spent money like one who has a store of gold angels and gold nobles in an iron chest rather than one who draws cheques on a banking account.”18 Laking was frequently in debt, and it seems only too likely that he supplemented his income with commissions and fees from advice given on purchases to both dealers and his wealthy collector friends, whom he assiduously cultivated. He was also less than scrupulous on occasion in passing off objects that he knew to be either problematic, or outright fakes to his clients.

Although we don’t know when they met, Laking was closely involved as an advisor to Alice in the formation of her arms and armour collection. At the same time, he was also advising William Waldorf Astor, 1st Viscount Astor, who was furnishing his newly-bought house, Hever Castle in Kent. Alice was clearly susceptible to his charm and regarded him as a friend; while he only appears in the Visitors’ Book at Waddesdon once, in August 1913, Alice soon stopped entertaining due to the outbreak of the First World War. He was also one of the few people singled out for a specific legacy in her will of £1,000, a considerable sum at the time, suggesting she saw him as part of her inner circle. Whether he was already a friend to whom she turned when she began the project, or whether the friendship grew out of what was originally a commercial relationship we don’t yet know, but Alice was both loyal and generous to those liked. The surviving receipts suggest that she made no significant purchase of arms after Laking’s death in 1919, although by then, Alice herself was in declining health.

Laking ensured that she acquired some exceptional objects. He was instrumental in her purchase of the most important pieces in the collection, including a helmet which was part of a parade armour for Emperor Charles V (fig. 6), probably made by the Caremolo Modrone, who was born in Mantua and then worked there for the Gonzaga from 1521.19 He was also involved in the acquisition of a pair of 1539 elbow pieces from another of Charles V’s parade armours, by Filippo Negroli, from the famous Milanese family of armourers, renowned for the quality of their embossing.20 Like the helmet, they were illustrated in the Inventario Illuminato, the illustrated inventory of Charles V’s armoury. Alice probably bought them directly from the collection of Baron Charles Alexander de Cosson, a great authority on arms and armour, who was also a friend of Laking. In another mark of her affection for him, both elbow pieces and helmet were also left to Laking in Alice’s will, listed as “Embossed helmet of Charles V, also pair of elbow pieces of Negroli in the Armoury at Waddesdon.” They only remain at Waddesdon because Laking died before she did, at the young age of 44.21
Body armour forms a small but important group, including another pair of shoulder and arm defences made for Guiseppe Matei, Duke of Giove, possibly in Rome or Brescia, around 1750. Another important acquisition was again prompted by Laking, as a circular parade shield probably made in the Antwerp workshop of Eliseus Libaerts c. 1555 for Henri II of France, embossed in low relief with a battle scene based on designs after Étienne Delaune. This came from the celebrated collection of Sir Adam Hay and was exhibited at the Special Exhibition of Works of Art on Loan at the South Kensington Museum in 1862, where it was described as “Italian work of the 16th century.” In the 1830s, it had been associated with Francis I.
Fig. 7: Parade shield embossed with a battle scene, attributed Eliseus Libaerts, c. 1555–9, iron, gold, canvas and velvet, possibly made for Henri II of France, Aylesbury, Waddesdon, acc. no. 2778, Bequest of James de Rothschild, 1957.

© Photo: Waddesdon Image Library, Mike Fear.

Fig. 8: Rapier, 1600–25, steel, iron, wood, silver and gold, signed for Pietro Hernandez, Toledo, the blade marked for Sandro Scacchi, Brescia, probably assembled in Toledo, Aylesbury, Waddesdon, acc. no. 679, Bequest of James de Rothschild, 1957.

© Photo: Waddesdon Image Library, Eost and Macdonald.
The largest groupings in the collection are the swords and rapiers, supplemented by daggers and knives, perhaps because these, along with long barrel rifles, lend themselves to the kinds of impressive visual displays seen in major European armouries, such as that at Schloss Ambras in Innsbruck. Alice acquired examples from England, Germany, Spain, and Italy. Many of them have degrees of alteration. One such example is a rapier acquired from Durlacher Bros. in 1908, described as a “Ring hilted rapier, straight quillons encrusted with vine ornaments and serpents in silver and fire gilt in panels. The blade inscribed on the ricasso SANDRI SCACCHI. N. Italian 2nd half of the 16th century.” It was sold with another rapier, a left-hand dagger, spurs and préséntoir for £2000. It has a blade bearing two marks of famous makers from Toledo in Spain, and Brescia in Italy, suggesting that it was made in Solingen, Germany, where it was common practice to add spurious signatures to increase value. Alice bought several other similarly decorated rapiers for display. The same 1908 purchase, the largest group brought from Durlacher, included another example which was attributed to the armurer La Roche d’Argent on the basis of an almost identical one in the Royal Collection, made for James I and signed. Laking, as Keeper of the Windsor Armouries, knew the Royal Collections intimately, and so must have encouraged Alice to buy this closely comparable example.

Firearms are the other most significant category, particularly wheel-lock rifles and pistols and like the rapiers and swords, acquired for their decorative features. Most have intricately worked barrels and stocks. One of the most outstanding was made in the 1670s by Christian Herold, a leading Dresden gun-maker. It has been altered, but probably shortly after it was made, with the addition of five enamel plaques, which cover some of the inlaid staghorn decoration. Herold’s family also worked as enamellers and painters in the Meissen porcelain factory and a group of four other guns by him with similar plaques survives.

By contrast, there are also rifles which are examples of 19th-century invention. One of these (fig. 9), with an extraordinarily decorated stock and barrel, has ornament derived from the prints of Étienne Delaune but the original barrel was probably 16th or 17th century, and plain. In the 19th century, the metal was blued, catering for late 19th-century taste for highly decorated guns, and ornamented with leaves, grotesques, and naked figures. It was gilded, and finally decorated sections with a technique known as counterfeit-damascening, setting thin gold wires into the base metal. The lock is similarly decorated. It was probably put together in the workshop of the dealer Frédéric Spitzer (1815–90), whose activities in this respect are well known. A number of Rothschilds acquired objects from Spitzer, either in his lifetime or after his death and sale in 1890, and the decoration on this gun compares with that on some of the guns Ferdinand is known to have acquired from the same source that are now in the Waddeson Bequest.
Powder flasks (fig. 10) form another distinct and large group, many of them decorated with engraved ivory or staghorn, with scenes based on popular 16th-century print sources including Jost Amman (1539–91) and Virgil Solis, and made in the metalworking centres of Augsburg and Nürnberg. Several of these also come from the Spitzer Collection. The number of pieces that have been added to, altered, remade and redecorated is not in itself surprising for a collection formed in the early 20th century. Alice was collecting at the end of a period when the market for arms and armour, particularly Renaissance and later pieces, was very lively, thanks to the activities of several wealthy collectors, amongst them Sir Richard Wallace, who had assembled an impressive collection (now in the Wallace Collection, London). There was also increasing competition from America, and particularly Bashford Dean, Curator of Arms and Armour at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, who likewise was advising and selling to a network of wealthy collectors. The trade had responded to meet the demand. Alice was also buying extensively, and at speed, as the surviving receipts show. In June 1909 alone, Durlacher Bros billed Alice for “a pair of Deruta dishes, a pair of Louis XVI candelabra, a fine gilt steel hilted sword, French, and gold inlaid rapier, Henri II, a dagger and sheath, Italian, c. 1530, an inlaid wood flask, damascened, German, 16th century, an embossed cartridge box, a small metal flask, a knife, French, Henri II and a left-handed dagger and sheath, c. 1570,” all for a total of £1,273. The following year a single receipt in July 1910 lists “a pair of pistols, German, c. 1590, untouched (rare on account of the brass bands), a pair of small 17th-century pistols, silver mounts, signed Lazarino Comminazo, a large gilt powder flask, mythological subjects, German 16th century, a carved ivory powder flask, 16th century” all for £500. The Italian pistols were made in Brento, a centre of gun-making between Florence and Bologna, in the second half of the 18th century, with barrels supplied and signed by a by a member of the specialist Brescian family of gunsmiths and barrel makers.
There is no visual evidence for the display of the arms and armour at Waddesdon in Alice’s time. It is known from the probate inventories that she showed them largely in the corridor in the Bachelors’ Wing, with a few examples in the Smoking Room itself. The current layout is based on that devised by Dorothy de Rothschild, who oversaw the opening of the house to the public after her husband, James de Rothschild (1878–1957) bequeathed it to the National Trust in 1957. Dorothy managed the Manor until her death in 1988. She knew the Manor in Alice’s time, having visited soon after her marriage, and had the greatest respect for her husband’s great aunt, so we presume that her arrangement was based on Alice’s. It emphasises visual impact, rather than arrangement by maker, technique, type or period. After Dorothy’s death in 1988, the present Lord Rothschild took over the management of the Manor, and oversaw a major restoration project, as part of which the Armoury Corridor, as it is now known, was redisplayed again. However, the historic arrangement was maintained to ensure that this atmospheric part of the house retains its historic links to both Ferdinand and Alice and their collecting.\[31]
NOTES


2. For Ferdinand’s own account of the building of Waddesdon, see *The Red Book*, privately published, 1897.


7. One of a set of stereoscopic autochromes recording interiors and the gardens at Waddesdon, by an unknown photographer and undated, although probably taken around 1910. Aylesbury, Waddesdon Archive at Windmill Hill (Waddesdon), acc. no. 3684.

8. Alice spent winters from 1888 at her villa, the Villa Victoria, in Grasse, in the Alpes-Maritimes. Her collection of smoking paraphernalia is now in the Bibliothèque municipale in Grasse. See also B. Rolland-Villemot, “Pipes et boîtes d’allumettes,” and the presentation of this collection by Yves Cruchet and André Leclaire, “Grasse, bibliothèque municipale,” in *Les Collections Rothschild dans les institutions publiques françaises*, INHA, n. d.


11. Ferdinand’s probate inventory, taken in 1898, the year of his death, records the contents of every room at the Manor, *ibid*.


Introduction to the reprint of Laking’s *Record of European Armour and Arms through Seven Centuries*, Cambridge, Trotman, 2000.

16. For the Meyrick Society, see *id.*, *The Meyrick Society, 1890–1990*, privately published, 1991. Laking was Vice President of the Society from 1910 until his death.


20. Waddesdon, acc. no. 5096.1 and 2; Claude Blair, *The James A. de Rothschild Collection*, *op. cit.*, cat. 2-3; Phillippa Plock’s commentary.

21. A copy of Alice’s will is held in Waddesdon.

22. Waddesdon, acc. no. 2778; Claude Blair, *The James A. de Rothschild Collection*, *op. cit.*, cat. 9; Phillippa Plock’s commentary.

23. For the 1908 receipt, see Waddesdon, acc. no. 282.1996.

24. Waddesdon, acc. no. 679; Claude Blair, *The James A. de Rothschild Collection*, *op. cit.*, cat. 26; Phillippa Plock’s commentary.


27. Waddesdon, acc. no. 5168; Claude Blair, *The James A. de Rothschild Collection*, *op. cit.*, cat. 100; Phillippa Plock’s commentary.


29. For one example, see Waddesdon, acc. no. 5202; Phillippa Plock’s commentary; Claude Blair, *The James A. de Rothschild Collection*, *op. cit.*, cat. 155 and ref. to Spitzer sale; Frédéric Spitzer, *Collection Spitzer*, n.p., n.d., vol. VI, p. 85, no. 404; sale, Paris, 10–14 June 1895, lot 409 (1,020 francs).


31. Waddesdon is now managed by the Rothschild Foundation under the chairmanship of Jacob, 4th Lord Rothschild (b. 1936), on behalf of the National Trust.