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Source: *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850 - the Present*, 2016, No. 40, THE CHARLES & LAVINIA HANDLEY-READ COLLECTION (2016), pp. 48-75

Published by: The Decorative Arts Society 1850 to the Present

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44606219>

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**'The Aesthetic Movement and the Cult of Japan', Fine Art Society exhibition, London, 1972;**  
a tile panel from Membrand House by William De Morgan from the Handley-Read Collection  
is visible in the centre; courtesy of the Fine Art Society, London.

# The Dispersal of the Handley-Read Collection

Simon Swynfen Jervis

Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit. ~ Virgil (1)

In 1963 Charles Handley-Read published a magisterial article in the *Burlington Magazine* on William Burges's painted furniture. (2) Two years later he contributed a substantial and original section on 'England, 1830-1901' with over a hundred illustrations to Helena Hayward's great compilation volume, *World Furniture* (1965). In 1968 Charles selected the nineteenth-century architecture and sculpture shown in the Royal Academy's bicentenary exhibition, and Lavinia Handley-Read's pioneering 'British Sculpture, 1850-1914' was shown at the Fine Art Society. Then, in late 1968, Charles gave a lecture, illustrated with no fewer than 140 slides, on 'High Victorian Design: Furniture and Architecture' at the Victorian Society's sixth annual conference, whose theme was 'Design, 1860-1960'. In its report, which included an account of his talk, Charles insisted on, and doubtless paid for, the addition of twenty-nine illustrations and a substantial commentary. In November 1969 Peter Thornton, Keeper of the Department of Furniture and Woodwork in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Francis Watson, not yet knighted but simultaneously Director of the Wallace Collection and Surveyor of The Queen's Works of Art, published a survey of 'The Present State of Furniture History Studies' in the *Burlington Magazine* in which 'they' (this sentence was doubtless drafted by Thornton) stated: 'Charles Handley-Read has long been working on Victorian furniture and we must hope that he will soon complete his studies and publish what will surely be a major contribution to our knowledge not only of the furniture itself but of nineteenth century thought in the field of the Arts'. This hope was not to be. In August 1970 Charles decided to hand over his plan for a book on William Burges, together with all his notes, to J. Mordaunt Crook. Charles's projected volume on the 'Victorian & Edwardian Decorative Arts', with 'Anatomies of Design, 1837-1914' as a possible title, never emerged, although towards the end he considered asking Clive Wainwright to participate as an acknowledged collaborator in the chapter on Gothic revival furniture. In fact Charles's final published works were posthumous: six substantial entries, mainly on Burges – and that on his Lille cathedral designs particularly long and wide-ranging – in the catalogue of the V&A's great 'Victorian Church Art' exhibition, which opened on 17th November 1971, a bare month after his suicide.

When, in late 1966 and aged a mere twenty-three, I was appointed an Assistant Keeper in the V&A Department of Furniture with the nineteenth century, previously the remit of Elizabeth Aslin in the Department of Circulation, as part of my bailiwick, the Handley-Reads, both Charles and Lavinia, seemed in the ascendant, at once as scholars and collectors. There were close relations between them and the V&A: Charles was, for instance, a long-standing friend of John Harthan, then the Keeper of the Library, and of Brian Reade, Deputy Keeper of Prints and Drawings, the re-discoverer of Mucha and of Aubrey Beardsley. Reade illustrated a gilt-plaster candelabrum by Humphrey Hopper belonging to Charles in his pioneering *Regency Furniture* (1953). For the Furniture Department the Haywards were

a key connection: John Hayward had just, in 1965, moved to Sotheby's, but he kept close contact with Peter Thornton, and was still on the two-man Editorial Committee of the Furniture History Society with Francis Watson (this was a small world). (3) Helena had, as noted, commissioned Charles to write the British nineteenth-century element in *World Furniture*, and they were quite close neighbours, the Haywards in Chepstow Villas and the Handley-Reads in Ladbroke Road. At Leicester Museum and Art Gallery, whence I moved to the V&A, I had briefly overlapped with Lionel Lambourne, who became Keeper of Art there in 1966, staying until 1970. He then returned to the V&A, where his career had started in 1958. Lionel was already planning his ambitious and admirable 'The Victorian Vision of Italy' exhibition (Leicester, 1968), one of whose stars was to be the Handley-Reads' great *Florence from Bellosguardo* by John Brett, and I had thus already heard something of Charles and Lavinia. When, at some point in 1967, I was given the *entrée*, thanks to Peter Thornton, I was, like so many others, ravished by the intensity (no 'tasteful gaps' in its arrangement), the opulence, the quality and the refined and stylish orchestration of their collection. This visit to 82 Ladbroke Road was the first of many, usually cocktail parties or dinners, predominantly for younger art historians, whom the Handley-Reads consciously fostered with great generosity. Clive Wainwright, who joined the V&A Furniture Department in 1968, was welcomed as part of this informal group.

There is no doubt that Charles's involvement, which came sometimes to approach obsession, with the decorative arts of the nineteenth century was sparked by the V&A's great 1952 exhibition of 'Victorian & Edwardian Decorative Arts', organised by Peter Floud and a small team of colleagues in the Circulation Department, to celebrate the centenary of the Museum of Ornamental Art, the V&A's direct ancestor, which opened at Marlborough House in 1852. With no fewer than 828 exhibits, several multiple, this must have been overwhelming to the susceptible, but for Charles this was no Pauline conversion. His interests were wide-ranging and when, in 1955, he applied for the assistant lectureship in fine arts at Cambridge University, which was to be secured by Michael Jaffé, his demonstration lectures were an exploration of monumental painting in relation to architectural space in Italy from about 1400 to 1600, supported by elegantly drawn diagrams. Preparing his contribution on 'Aspects of Victorian Architecture' in *From Dickens to Hardy* (1958), the sixth volume of *The Penguin Guide to English Literature*, edited by Boris Ford, must have focussed Charles on the nineteenth century. An even more specific focus is apparent in his article on William Burges in *Victorian Architecture* (1963), a volume edited by Peter Ferriday containing seventeen essays of which Charles's, prefaced by the promise of a 'fuller study', was by far the longest. Subsequent to their marriage in 1953, the Courtauld-trained Lavinia's knowledge and appreciation of



**I** A decanter designed by William Burges and made by George Angell of sang-de-boeuf porcelain, silver, enamel and semi-precious stones, London, 1870; designed to commemorate the publication of Burges's *Architectural Drawings*; given from the Handley-Read Collection, V&A M.22-1972.

Victorian art had led them to acquire small Victorian paintings (starting with a little Albert Moore for £4. 10s.) to set alongside their Regency furniture (previously Charles, as might be inferred from the subject of his first book, *The Art of Wyndham Lewis* [1951], which reflected an interest going back to his school days, had been inclined towards the twentieth century). The receipt in 1958 of a substantial bequest from an aunt (others followed in 1964 and 1965) allowed them to buy 82 Ladbroke Road and to set about collecting on quite a different scale.

The illustrations of Handley-Read objects in *World Furniture* suggest a relatively tentative start, but the range rapidly expanded to represent all the different themes detailed in the catalogue of the 1972 Royal Academy exhibition. Charles's energy in patrolling the stalls in Portobello Road and the nearby dealers' shops, and in keeping an eye on the auction rooms, never relented. Not only did he act as an informal consultant for Christie's first and only sale of *Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts* (18th July 1968, three years before Sotheby's Belgravia started operations), but he was both a seller of some lesser pieces from 82 Ladbroke Road and the purchaser of the second most expensive lot, a marvellous mounted *sang-de-boeuf* porcelain decanter made for Burges himself, which had been shown at the 1952 exhibition and is now in the V&A. (Fig. 1) He was assiduous at quizzing friends and acquaintances for contacts which might lead to an acquisition or to documentation, and pursued many descendants of designers and craftsmen with ruthless courtesy. This activity was not confined to London and England. In 1966, for example, on their way to Darmstadt and Nancy, the Handley-Reads visited the elderly Baron Jean van Caloen at the Château de Loppem near Bruges, designed by Edward Welby Pugin and the repository of a remarkable album of drawings by Alfred Gilbert. Charles was quite frequently in Paris, where he knew all the main Art Nouveau dealers, notably Alain Lesieutre and the American Robert (Bob) Walker, and when Bob Walker moved, briefly, to Westminster, I remember Charles in 1971 arranging a visit to his flat, where the contents included a monumental vitrine by Gallé for the Paris 1900 Exhibition, a superlative cabinet by Ruhlmann and a small but intense desk by Guimard which we acquired for the V&A. (Fig. 2). To dealers and friends alike Charles was generous with information and tip-offs. Both Clive Wainwright and I acquired objects for ourselves thanks to advice given or opportunities opened by him. (4) And, in 1968, when he heard that I planned an article on Carlo Bugatti, he handed me his file on this then virtually unknown designer.

In January 1971 a major display of the V&A's nineteenth-century continental decorative arts, including three recently acquired Bugatti pieces, opened at Bethnal Green Museum; Elizabeth Aslin and I, working amicably together, had been responsible for its arrangement. I was not to know that in 1970, after Peter Thornton had mentioned Charles's studies of Victorian furniture in the *Burlington Magazine*, Charles, in thanks for this accolade, had reported that Evelyn Antal, the widow of the celebrated Marxist art historian, Frederick Antal, was cross that 'a friend – shall we leave it at that? – has been overlooked', undoubtedly a reference to Elizabeth Aslin,



2 A rosewood and brass-mounted desk, the design attributed to Hector Guimard, Paris, circa 1895; purchased from Bob Walker after an introduction by Charles Handley-Read, V&A W.15-1971.

whose *19th Century Furniture* (1962) had blazed the trail. After the War Charles had applied for a job at the Tate Gallery and been rejected. This experience affected him deeply and in his draft introduction to the exhibition he was never to see he wrote: 'I will admit that this collection can be seen as compensation for an unfulfilled ambition. Unable to work in a museum I made a small one of my own.' For Charles, working for a national museum seemed to imply membership of a privileged priesthood, which naturally included those who had mounted the V&A's 1952 'Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts' exhibition, whose very title has cropped up more than once as a *leitmotif* in this essay. He had probably picked up that Elizabeth Aslin, one of its protagonists, had no particular regard for him (perhaps understandably Elizabeth did tend to regard him as a wealthy *arriviste* in her field), although he was very close to Shirley Bury, another of the 1952 pioneers. Albeit a decade younger than Charles, Peter Thornton was, as Keeper of Furniture, regarded as a high priest, and even I, an Assistant Keeper still in my twenties, was sometimes in the peculiar position of having my judgement deferred to by someone a generation older whom I regarded as both a mentor and an established authority.

By 1968 Charles had become concerned for the future of the collection. There were practical aspects: 82 Ladbrooke Road was threatening to burst at the seams; insurance and security were worries; and there was a dearth of book space. He was also aware that the collection was of considerable importance (in his own words 'Nearly every item has been selected according to what might be called 'Museum standards ... I mean quality, condition, fullness of documentation, associational interest, even scale') and he hoped to find a permanent home for it. The first possibility was Leicester, where the University had established a Victorian Studies centre in 1966, and where the Professor of the History of Art, Hamish Miles, proved a sympathetic contact. Charles also explored Cambridge, his old university, having heard that a plan for new buildings was being hatched by the Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, David Piper, to whom he wrote. Nothing came of this and at Leicester the focus for a potential location shifted from the University to Leicester Museum and Art Gallery. In April 1970 Charles wrote to Peter Thornton asking him for advice on the tax position regarding such a prospective bequest, and Peter immediately secured a helpful informal opinion from Christopher Robin Ponter at the Estate Duty Office (the predecessor of the Capital Taxes Office), with whom the Furniture Department had had many dealings over exemption matters. In forwarding this to Charles, Peter Thornton wrote of the collection:

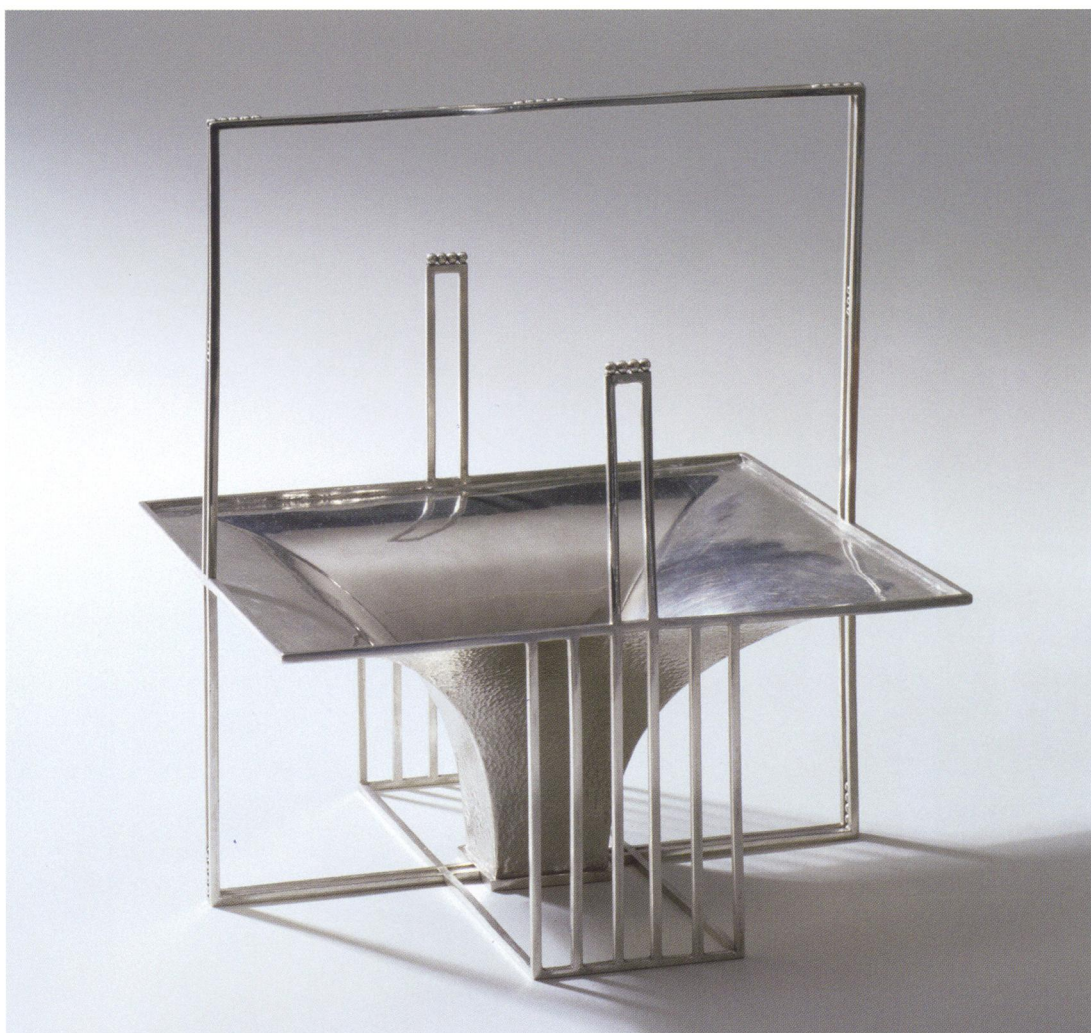
Here [at the V&A] its impact might be reduced to some extent when juxtaposed with the rest of the collection, although I think you exaggerate this. Perhaps, all the same, you might bequeath just one superb piece to the Victoria & Albert Museum in memory, as it were, of fruitful collaboration – which, after all, it has been, in spite of the odd moments of friction. The Museum would certainly be proud to have a piece that had belonged to someone who had laid the foundations of scholarship in the Victorian field with such thoroughness and good taste.

He went on to underline the Department's desire to copy as much as possible of the information that Charles had assembled.

The Leicester project remained alive. In June 1970 Charles wrote to Dennis Farr, then Director of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, enquiring about the possibility that the 1882 Shakespeare Memorial Library, designed by John Henry Chamberlain, might be demolished, with the thought that, if it were, it might be moved to Leicester to form part of the installation for the Handley-Read collection. Farr's helpful reply enclosed a copy of a plan and briefing prepared by the Victorian Society's local branch, but in the end Chamberlain's interior has remained in Birmingham, its latest home being at the top of the Library of Birmingham opened in 2013. Dealing with Leicester Museum and Art Gallery proved slow: it was not until the beginning of October that its Director, Trevor Walden, was able to write to Charles

saying that the Town Clerk would soon be contacting him to arrange a visit. In the meantime, another factor had emerged: the Royal Academy had agreed to show the whole collection in its Diploma Galleries (transformed into the Sackler Galleries in 1991) in February, March and April 1972. Charles now had about a year in which to produce the catalogue. Then, on 6th October 1970, while a letter from the Town Clerk proposing a visit was in the post, Charles and Lavinia entertained Peter and Ann Thornton to what proved to be a momentous dinner, at which the V&A emerged as a possible destination for the collection.

On 15th October Charles wrote to Walden announcing that, although he had reached no final decision, 'it has recently been represented to me with the utmost possible force that the collection might ultimately be more useful to scholars and students if it were partly given and partly bequeathed to the V&A'. On the same day Charles wrote to Thornton of 'the idea I put to you the other evening', in a letter which also told him that he had written to Walden using the terms just quoted. This development was, of course, a great blow to Leicester. Had Walden been in a position to promise a building to house the collection after the Royal Academy exhibition, he might have saved the day, but he could not go beyond 'a real likelihood' and, although a fortnight later he visited 82 Ladbrooke Road again, accompanied by Geoffrey Bemrose, the long-retired Curator of the Stoke-on-Trent Museum, who was a Leicester native



**3** A silver fruit basket designed by Josef Hoffmann for the Wiener Werkstätte, Vienna, 1904; shown (ex-catalogue) in 'Vienna Secession', Royal Academy, London, 1971; purchased from the Handley-Read Collection, V&A, M.40-1972.

and acted as honorary keeper of ceramics, and by Herald Goddard of the silver polish dynasty, a great benefactor of Leicester Museum (and the builder of a very advanced Modern house there, designed by Fello Atkinson and Brenda Walker in 1953), the writing was on the wall and Leicester dropped out of the picture. In his earlier letter thanking Thornton for his help with estate duty advice Charles had written: 'And, yes, in all kinds of ways I have been deeply indebted to the V&A: such sense as I have of "Museum quality, significance and scale" is to a considerable extent due to informal conversations and informal inspections behind the scenes with John Hayward, Shirley Bury, yourself, and other members of your Department', and in his draft introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition he was never to see, he summed up his feelings: 'Rather my name on a V&A label than on a tombstone'. The appeal of the V&A indeed proved irresistible

There followed eleven months of activity and pressure on several fronts. The need to produce the catalogue for the Royal Academy exhibition was ever greater, and behind this loomed the consciousness that 'Anatomies of Design' was long overdue. In the foreground was the need to sort out which objects were to go to the V&A immediately after the exhibition, whether as gifts or proposed bequests, and which were to be held back as furnishing for 82 Ladbroke Road. A special category was formed by some fifteen mainly continental objects of high value, including pieces by Feuillâtre, Gallé and Tiffany, which were to go on loan but whose ownership the Handley-Reads would retain as an insurance in case money were to run short. Collecting was ever a pleasure and a tempting distraction: with both the exhibition and posterity in view, there were always plausible reasons for adding objects, and opportunities were legion, whether

this involved seeking out descendants of designers and their clients, or the simpler process of walking to Richard Dennis's shop in Kensington Church Street, full of tempting ceramics (after Charles's death Richard had the poignant task of valuing his collection). The collection had long included some twentieth-century objects, including a silver fruit basket (Fig. 3) and a gilt metal bowl designed by Josef Hoffmann for the Wiener Werkstätte in 1904 and about 1920, respectively, both shown *hors catalogue* at the 1971 Royal Academy 'Vienna Secession' exhibition. Henceforward expanding this aspect of the collection seemed a particularly logical and defensible strategy. Charles scoured *The Indecisive Decade* (1968) for leads which he followed up with its author, Madge Garland (Lady Ashton), who was a friend, and it was at this late stage that he acquired his black block screen by Eileen Gray (Fig. 4), then unknown but for a single 1968 article in *Domus* by Joseph Rykwert.



4 A black lacquered wood screen with brass rods designed and made by Eileen Gray, Paris, 1923; given from the Handley-Read Collection, V&A, W.21-1972.





**5** A couch of varied woods with inlay of mother-of-pearl; one side is 'Pompeian' and the other 'Egyptian', designed by Lawrence Alma Tadema, London, about 1893; shown at the 1893 Arts and Crafts Exhibition and purchased with assistance from Charles Handley-Read, V&A, W.3-1971.

This was also a period in which Charles's involvement with the V&A became ever closer. Thus in one of his many lists he noted of a superb Holland and Sons cabinet which he bought at Christie's in February 1971: 'Acquired after discussion with Peter Thornton & Simon Jervis'. About the same time he gave the Museum £100 towards the purchase of a half-Pompeian, half-Egyptian Alma-Tadema couch (Fig. 5), shown at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in 1893, and the Museum purchased an 1873 portfolio stand by Luigi Frullini (Fig. 6) as a result of a tip-off from him. The intimacy of the relationship with the V&A may be further illustrated by the case of a now celebrated screen made in 1867 as a wedding present from James Forsyth to R. Norman Shaw and almost certainly designed by William Eden Nesfield. (Fig. 7) In 1969, after the success of Lavinia's 'British Sculpture, 1850-1914', the Handley-Reads suggested to the Fine Art Society the exhibition, 'The Aesthetic Movement and the Cult of Japan' (1972). When this screen appeared in a Bonham's sale catalogue, it was clear to Charles that it was at once a prime desideratum for inclusion in this exhibition, and a natural candidate for acquisition by the V&A. By the day of the sale (27th October 1971) Charles was dead, but it was very much in the spirit of the Museum's collaboration with him that the Fine Art Society bought the screen on behalf of the Museum, but this was not revealed until after the exhibition had opened (its lengthy catalogue entry was written by the present writer). A final direct benefaction to the V&A had been an unusual *papier-mâché* chair by Jennens and Bettridge of Birmingham, japanned white with gilt moresque ornament and with red felt upholstery embroidered in the same style.

**6** A walnut folio stand designed and made by Luigi Frullini, Florence, 1973; purchased at the suggestion of Charles Handley-Read, V&A, W.10-1971.





**7** An ebonised and gilt wood screen with Japanese paper, design attributed to William Eden Nesfield, London, 1867; a wedding present to Richard Norman Shaw from his carver, James Forsyth; purchased through the Fine Art Society and shown in their 'Aesthetic Movement and the Cult of Japan' exhibition in 1972, as intended by Charles Handley-Read, V&A, W.37-1972.

As the months had ticked by, preparations for the exhibition and its catalogue gained in urgency. Charles was constantly drafting and re-drafting detailed and elaborate entries, and also working out possible arrangements of objects in exquisitely deft and accurate sketch elevations. He toyed quite seriously with filling ‘gaps’ in the exhibition’s narrative by borrowing objects from his friends’ collections, with the result that the target became more indeterminate and progress even less concrete. Lavinia, seeing that he was in great difficulty and distress, wrote a long typed letter to Peter Thornton at the end of July 1971, appealing for help. Peter was then on leave at his house in Ireland, but immediately sent me his handwritten reply, now lost, offering help. He directed that I should send it on ‘in an *unofficial* envelope with M.S. addressing: I suppose she does not want C.H.R. to know she has written as she has done’. In her handwritten reply, undated, Lavinia wrote: ‘As we know you are young to be a father figure for Charles, but he would I think accept your guidance’. After over forty years it is difficult to remember the precise nature and sequence of the discussions which followed this exchange, but my impression is that Peter, who had returned from Ireland towards the end of August, impressed on Charles that it would not make sense for the planned exhibition to be diluted by extraneous loans: at this late stage their negotiation would pose practical problems but, more importantly, it would be a disservice to posterity thus to obscure the Handley-Read achievement. Then, having made this case, which Charles accepted, Peter offered the services of Clive Wainwright and myself as Victorian ‘specialists’ to help with the articulation of the exhibition, with individual catalogue entries, and in any other way possible.

Clive and I then visited Charles – more than once, I believe, in early October – to go through the structure of the exhibition and the entries, and to explore our taking on some of the latter. It was readily apparent that he had already thought through the possible structural divisions, which had to reflect shifting balances of style and date, but that what was holding him back was a rigorous perfectionism with regard to both content and its expression. A symptomatic crux was the title, and to a lesser extent the components, of what emerged as the third section of the exhibition, eventually headed, in the catalogue, ‘Commercial Tours de force: Renaissance and eclectic influences’. This baggy formulation, for which I must have been responsible, more-or-less ‘does the job’, but I would not pretend that it is crisp or elegant, particularly alongside ‘The Gothic Revival’ and ‘The Art Movement’, which preceded and followed it. Charles would have wanted something at once more expressive and more epigrammatic. He wrote with great difficulty, although his published writings give little hint of the underlying struggles, unlike his numerous drafts, full of excisions, interpolations, re-phrasings, dwindlings into note form or silence, starts and re-starts. What made the process so agonising as to become lethal (the word is not used lightly) is that Charles had been told at a much earlier age that he was incapable of writing well and he believed it. The task he had taken on was thus, by definition, Sisyphean, and the pressure of time was ever mounting. Clive and I were ready and willing, indeed anxious, to help but the discussions never crystallised into a concrete brief. Then, on 15th October 1971, Charles killed himself. It is only recently that I have read the lucid but tragic note which he left for Peter Thornton. It makes clear that the reason was a sense of inadequacy and failure, and of guilt, paradoxically both for failure and for what he was about to do.

Charles’s death was a ghastly surprise to everyone, above all Lavinia; he was only fifty-five. Nonetheless it was urgent for both her and the Royal Academy to decide whether the planned exhibition should go ahead, one factor being the need to find someone to put the catalogue together and arrange the objects. Sir Thomas Monnington, then President of the Academy, who had chaired its 1968 Bicentenary Exhibition’s committee and much admired and valued Charles’s contributions, was keen to go ahead as planned; Lavinia, seeing it as a memorial to Charles, was equally positive; and Peter Thornton, with the sanction of the V&A’s director, Sir John Pope-Hennessy, volunteered me for the organising role. I was then living in

Moscow Road in Bayswater and thenceforward on most days I walked down to 82 Ladbroke Road, where Lavinia was still living, and set to work to plan and catalogue the exhibition with a shifting accompaniment of colleagues and helpers. We met Lavinia, who was now mainly quartered in the basement, for elevenses and tea. Otherwise she worked on the sculpture entries and was mostly alone with her thoughts. Although she was always dignified, often amusing and ever helpful, her grief was apparent. In November she was exploring, through her lawyers and the Estate Duty Office, the possibility of offering chattels in part satisfaction of estate duty, but this negotiation was never completed. For, sadly, the epigram associated with Sir Henry Wotton:

He first deceased; she for a little tried  
To live without him, liked it not and died.

proved a model. Lavinia's suicide, on 9th December 1971, came as a grave shock, but it seemed explicable in a way that Charles's, less than two months earlier, had not.

Again the future of the exhibition, due to open in less than three months, was in the balance. The decision lay with Lavinia's younger brother and heir, Thomas Stainton, whose interest in commemorative medals had been directed by her towards the nineteenth century. By 1967 he had assembled the only full set of those issued by the Art Union of London, and a nearly complete series of those issued by the Corporation of London. He wrote the 'Introduction to Medals' in Lavinia's 'British Sculpture, 1850-1914', lending ninety-three of the 116 medals shown, and also selected and catalogued all the medals in the Royal Academy Bicentenary Exhibition of the same year. With such interests and sympathies it is not surprising that he decided that the exhibition should go ahead. Just before the end of January 1972 I was able to report that the assembly of the exhibition catalogue was complete, and thenceforward concentrated on design and arrangement. With a minimal budget for display felt, the staple-gun and the spot-light were the crucial ingredients, while a partial black-out of the Diploma Galleries was improvised by slinging black polythene haystack covers over its skylights, producing a muted but recognisable echo of the glitter and intensity of 82 Ladbroke Road.

After all these years some reactions read curiously. The nadir was perhaps Nigel Gosling in *The Observer* (5th March 1972), who liked the *art nouveau* glass and metalwork, and the Eileen Gray screen, but, as for the rest:

To the untrained observer, much of the content will appear no different from the bric-à-brac which comes up in provincial sale rooms, and is undeniably ugly. Structure and ornament, moral principles and aesthetic judgments, eccentricities, sentiments and ostentation are fatally confounded. The collector loved a good old Victorian jumble, and he magnificently achieved it, though on close inspection almost all the pieces have a stylistic point to make. Everything is lovable in a doggy way: much of it is laughable; some of it is laudable. The very lack of any artistic guideline becomes exhilarating.

Caroline Tisdall, by contrast, took her readers round the display in some detail in a full page of *The Guardian* (4th March 1972), and concluded:

The Handley-Read collection, if Victorian design is to be taken seriously, is unmatched anywhere, according to scholars of the subject. Its future as a collection, if not bought by a museum or housed somewhere, is extremely doubtful. If it is dispersed we may regret it in ten years' time.

In the *Sunday Times* (5th March 1972), John Russell was brief and ultimately patronising: 'If "their nonsense suits your nonsense" don't miss the show'. Terence Mullaly (*Daily Telegraph*, 6th March 1972) was not an unequivocal admirer of all the objects (who could be?) in the collection, but stressed its importance as an ensemble:

It is imperative that the collection be kept together. Many of the objects in it are frankly hideous, the majority of much greater documentary and historical value than artistic interest, but kept together as a group they offer an extraordinary insight into an age.

Peter Campbell contributed a short essay to *The Listener* (9th March 1972), which hovered intelligently between a positive and a negative tone, but ultimately adopted the latter:

So despite the richness, the intricacy, the inventiveness, despite the fascination of seeing a style adapted to a new material, a new idea emerging, a new influence being absorbed, there is a superfluity which disgusts. It is an intellectual superfluity as much as a material one. There are too many styles, too many possibilities. Art history, from being the discipline that explains the collection, becomes not just the strongest but perhaps the only reason for bringing it together.

Denys Sutton wrote a long and typically pontifical article in the *Financial Times* in March 1972 in which faint praise was outbalanced by accusations of an indiscriminate ‘magpie approach’, and concluded, in response to the suggestion that the collection be acquired by the nation:

It is hard to endorse this claim, even though the collection does contain a number of important items. If acquisitions are to be made in the area of 19<sup>th</sup>-century art, then it might well prove more constructive to purchase the best pieces and to secure a fuller representation of the American, French and Central European craftsmen.

In the April 1972 *Burlington Magazine*, Keith Roberts was brief but appreciative. A much more extensive treatment by Arnold Whittick in the April 1972 *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* took the exhibition seriously, albeit he judged Burges’s furniture ‘heavy and crude’, and felt that: ‘It would be a pity if the collection were dispersed; a selection at least should find its way into a national museum.’

It is perhaps not surprising that the Handley-Read exhibition should have elicited some mixed reactions among its reviewers. The Victorian Society had only been founded in 1958, and in 1972 several critics came from generations disposed to dislike and therefore to denigrate Victorian art. There had always been considerable knowledge and appreciation of Victorian painting and, to a much lesser extent, sculpture, but the decorative arts were unknown and apparently inchoate territory. It seemed difficult for some to understand an approach to collecting which was partly that of the aesthete, selecting objects for their beauty, and partly that of the historian, selecting objects for their documentary or representative interest, with the inevitable consequence that certain items, however fascinating, were not – and were not presented as – models of beauty. It was moreover a stretch for them to comprehend that a collector who admired Burges could also admire Eileen Gray. It is a relief to turn to the contributions of three unequivocal and informed admirers of the collection and the exhibition, all of whom knew Charles and Lavinia personally. The first, Bevis Hillier, who had borrowed an Edgar Wood mirror from Charles for his Minneapolis ‘The World of Art Deco’ exhibition (1971), wrote a long essay in *The Times* (4th March 1972), partly an amusing memoir of his acquaintance with them, and part a lively and appreciative characterisation of the collection. Towards the end he posed ‘One question that no one is very keen (or possibly even able) to answer is, what happens to the Handley-Read Collection after the academy show ends?’, answering, ‘It was always Charles’s wish that the Victoria and Albert Museum should have much of it, and that would still seem to be the best plan, because the V&A has the experts best qualified to deal with it’, adding that its dispersal in the saleroom would be a shame. A second long and positive notice, by Derek Linstrum, was published in the *Yorkshire Post* (13th March 1972); it included an admiring reference to Charles’s 1968 Victorian Society lecture on High Victorian design. A third celebratory account was by Mark Girouard: in a well-illustrated two pages of *Country Life* (16th March 1972) he evoked Charles and Lavinia’s personalities and their hospitality, and the scintillating delights of 82 Ladbroke Road, with real warmth and insight.

Before attempting to respond to Hillier's 'what happens?' question with an account of what did happen, some idea of the scale of the collection may be useful. The exhibition's catalogue, *Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Art, The Handley-Read Collection* (1972), supplies part of the answer (it may be noted *en passant* that this title, with 'Art' rather than 'Arts' calculatedly at once paid homage to and differentiated itself from the V&A's 1952 exhibition), and a double statistical analysis, by themes and by 'materials', of the 789 exhibits there listed, several multiple, may be useful:

Themes		Materials	
The Early Victorian Period	49	Furniture and Marquetry	119
The Gothic Revival	142	Ceramics, Tiles, Glass, Enamels	351
Commercial <i>Tours de force</i> :		Metalwork	109
Renaissance and Eclectic Influences	90	Textiles	8
The Art Movement	167	Sculpture	108
The Arts and Crafts Movement and the Glasgow School	137	Paintings, Drawings and Prints	84
The New Sculpture	61	Books	8
British and Foreign Ceramics and Glass	114		
The 20 <sup>th</sup> Century	29		

These quantities, however apportioned, were formidable, but Thomas Stainton also had to contend with a daunting number of objects still at 82 Ladbroke Road, along with Charles's substantial library and his scholarly estate, in the form of notes and files, card indices, slides and photographs. Lavinia had been Charles's sole beneficiary under his will, and Thomas was Lavinia's sole beneficiary under her will, so there were no testamentary provisions to guide him in the future disposition of the collection, and no potential beneficiary with definitive documents to produce in making a case, although the V&A was the closest to that position.

The exhibition was to last under two months, from 4th March to 30th April 1972. Already at the end of January Peter Thornton had written to Thomas Stainton stressing the need to know what would happen to its contents. The V&A file includes a draft 'suggested letter to P.T., as for the Museum Director', typed and annotated by Thomas: undated it seems to have been written about this time and must have been for discussion with Peter, but never sent. It floats a proposal that the V&A buy 'the Woodwork and Metalwork collections' for £40,000 'which to the best of my belief is very substantially below their market value', and a later clause reads: 'Anything I agree with you must be subject to a check by my Solicitor, who says I am walking a financial tightrope'. The draft exudes good intentions, severe worries and a lack of realism. Thomas had to be concerned about insurance, covered by the Royal Academy during the exhibition, but due to lapse thereafter, and about storage. He would also have to obtain valuations for estate duty and to serve as a basis for any sales to museums. Within the V&A there was some feeling of entitlement: on 12th March 1972 Charles's old friend, Brian Reade, who had delivered the address at his memorial service on 22nd November 1971 at Holy Trinity, Sloane Street, wrote privately to Peter expressing a view that the Museum's investment in storage and conservation, and in cataloguing and organising the exhibition, all of which may, incidentally, have added value to its contents, gave it a strong moral claim. Four days earlier Peter had sent a twelve-point memorandum to Sir John Pope-Hennessy setting out the situation and making a case for acquisitions, including:

3. To have landed this Collection, or most of it, would have been a great triumph for the Museum and would have saved an immense amount of trouble and much money.

5. Strenuous efforts should, in my view, be made to retrieve what we can from the present situation.

10. The space devoted in the Primary Galleries to English 19th century art is far smaller than that at present given to the 18th century and about one quarter that given to the 17th and 18th centuries combined.

On the same day, 8th March 1972, Thomas Stainton had written to Sir John about storage, a subject he had already raised with Peter, and asking for lists from all the relevant V&A departments of their desiderata for purchase, almost everything in the exhibition being available. Even before that letter arrived Sir John had replied, instantly, to Peter's twelve-point memorandum with a six-point one of his own. He was very concerned that the purchases and gifts should not be confused and was, understandably, reluctant to consider any storage of the collection at public expense, unless substantial gifts were promised. As for purchases:

4. While I recognise the importance of the Handley-Read collection, I would not be prepared to sanction purchases from it on a level which would significantly prejudice purchasing in other areas throughout the next financial year. I should expect individual departments to commit the whole of their 1972-3 entitlement before assistance from the Central Fund is invoked.

6. I am soliciting the views of the Advisory Council at their meeting on March 9th on policy respecting the Handley-Read collection.

His fourth point was one any museum director might have made in similar circumstances, but the sixth was both deft and peculiar to the V&A.

Until 1983, when it was devolved to the control of a Board of Trustees, the Museum was directly under the Department of Education and Science, but it had had, since 1913, an Advisory Council of the great and good. Without executive power, the Council's original purpose was to advise the Department but, by Pope-Hennessy's advent as Director in 1967, its role was more to advise the Director, becoming, in effect, a sounding-board and, when convenient, scape-goat. Its Chairman since 1970, Lord Gibson, cannot have been unaware of Victorian painting, his wife, *née* Dione Pearson, having in the 1960s acquired important works by Rossetti and the celebrated Millais portrait of Ruskin, now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. However, the Victorian decorative arts were doubtless unfamiliar territory for most of its members, and Pope-Hennessy's suggestion that he consult his old friend, Lord Clark, whose *The Gothic Revival* (1928, revised 1950) had pioneered that theme and whose 'Civilisation' television series (1969) had lent him well-nigh unassailable authority, was readily approved. In a letter promising to visit the exhibition Clark exclaimed: 'Certainly no more Burgess [*sic*] furniture!' (curiously, in *The Gothic Revival* he had mentioned 'the brilliant play-acting Burges' as one of Sir Gilbert Scott's architectural superiors, and in 1932 he had bought Burges's Great Bookcase for the Ashmolean Museum; perhaps by 1972 he had forgotten his merits). On 6<sup>th</sup> April he reported to Pope-Hennessy:

I would be against the acquisition of any large piece of furniture. Most of them were hideous, but even the more innocuous [*sic*] pieces would take up a lot of room and although they might look nice in a domestic setting they are not exhibitable objects in a museum. The best furniture done in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is hardly represented. It was made by Aspreys, usually in satinwood, and most of it is really distinguished [*sic*]. The most complete set I know is in the Werners' private rooms at Luton Hoo.



**8** A tile panel designed by William Morris and made by William De Morgan, London, 1876, for Membrand Hall, Devon; intended as a gift from Charles Handley-Read, V&A, C.36-1972.



When Pope-Hennessy reported this verdict to me I was powerless to demur, having never penetrated the bedrooms at Luton Hoo. When, decades later, I did, it was amusing to find that the furniture Clark admired was in fact high quality ‘Adam Revival’, probably specified by Georges Hoentschel, acting as a sub-contractor to Mewès & Davis, in about 1905. In a side-swipe Clark also pronounced that ‘the occasional art nouveau objects are not of the best quality and compared to the various Hesse collections in Darmstadt and the environs, they are unimportant’, another misjudgement.

That Thomas Stainton was determined to behave honourably, and had goodwill towards the V&A, was demonstrated by his confirmation of Charles’s intended gift to the Museum of a superb tile panel by William De Morgan (Fig. 8) and a portfolio stand probably designed by Samuel Sanders Teulon for his first great country house commission, Tortworth Court (both had been shown in the exhibition). But he, and his lawyers, needed advice on the options open to him. Already when, in November 1971, shortly before her death, Lavinia had enquired into the possibility of offering chattels in part satisfaction of estate duty, Mrs B. E. Hodgkinson, Senior Examiner at the Estate Duty Office, had set out the provisions, and in March 1972 she did so again. An unsung heroine in her constant efforts to apply heritage provisions as helpfully and as flexibly as possible, Mrs Hodgkinson also warned Peter Thornton that Sotheby’s Belgravia were, not surprisingly, putting their case to Thomas Stainton and his lawyers. To simplify slightly, any such sales would be subject to 70 percent estate duty, apart from Sotheby’s 12½ percent commission, whereas gifts to museums would be totally exempt and reduce the tax burden on the estate, while sales to museums would carry duty at only three quarters of 60 percent (not the 70 percent top rate), and museums would consequently pay reduced prices. This benevolent formula found favour with Thomas Stainton, who was in any case keen to memorialise Charles and Lavinia. There was nonetheless a need for delicacy and diplomacy: the V&A, for example, needed to know what objects would be coming as gifts, before finalising its ‘shopping lists’. Once Peter Thornton had offered the Museum’s services as a clearing house for applications for purchase from provincial museums – and interest was very rapidly registered, Halina Grubert (now Lady Graham) of the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery in Bedford having written to Sir John Pope-Hennessy on 9th March 1972 and Kenneth Barton of the Portsmouth Museum to me on 16th March – the possibilities multiplied.

It was not until 1st May 1972, immediately after the close of the Royal Academy exhibition, that Pope-Hennessy was able to write to Thomas Stainton to thank him for his gifts to the V&A, which were to be acknowledged as, ‘Given in memory of Charles and Lavinia Handley-Read by their family’. The benefaction had proved to be munificent: sixteen objects or groups, seven of which, asterisked hereafter, were mentioned in Charles’s final note to Peter. It comprised G.E. Street’s own monumental



**9** A walnut commode with ebony mouldings, designed by Thomas Jeckyll for One Holland Park, the home of A.A. Ionides, London, circa 1875; given from the Handley-Read Collection, V&A, W.14-1972.



**10** A stoneware tulip vase designed by William Burges, possibly Staffordshire, 1874; for the Summer Smoking Room, Cardiff Castle; given from the Handley-Read Collection, V&A, C.40-1972.

bookcase\* by Holland & Sons; a Liberty satinwood suite of cabinet, table and chairs\*; a cabinet\* by Holland & Sons with inlay after Thomas Hope; a sideboard\* after a plate in Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste*; a sofa\* designed by E.W. Godwin; a dressing-table\* and commode\* designed by Thomas Jeckyll for -A.A. Ionides; (Fig. 9) a 1923 black lacquer block screen\* by Eileen Gray; (Fig. 4) Godwin's 'Four Seasons' cabinet, made by William Watt; a *sang-de-boeuf* decanter mounted in silver-gilt by William Burges; (Fig. 1) a *plique-à-jour* enamel dish by Eugène Feuillâtre; (Fig. 15) a 'Florentine pattern' silver dish by Pugin; a Burges tulip vase from the Smoking Room at Cardiff Castle; (Fig. 10); a Rozenburg vase designed by J. Juriaan Kok; a 1900 Sèvres vase designed by M. Gillet; a *pâte-de-verre* bowl by F. F. Décorchement; and a glass bottle by Emile Gallé. Nor was this the end of Thomas Stainton's generosity: he presented the most important painting in the collection, John Brett's extraordinary *Florence from Bellosguardo* (1863), to the Tate Gallery in memory of Charles and Lavinia. He also lent four Handley-Read pieces to the Leighton House exhibition, 'William De Morgan (1839-1917)', which opened within a month of the closure of that at the Royal Academy.

The gifts secured, the negotiation of the V&A's purchases could now proceed and became a pressing matter when, on 8th May 1972, Thomas Stainton's solicitors, Baileys, Shaw and Gillett, produced a price list. They promised also to inform the Estate Duty Office of the total estimated values of Charles and Lavinia's estates so that the rate of duty could be calculated. The relevant Keepers, Terence Hodgkinson (Architecture and Sculpture), Robert Charleston (Ceramics), Peter Thornton (Furniture and Woodwork), Shirley Bury (Metalwork) and Donald King (Textiles) were asked to prepare lists of desiderata in priority order, with a rough indication from the Estate Duty Office that the Museum would only have to pay about half the prices asked. It is interesting to read Furniture and Woodwork's rationale for leaving out some major Burges pieces from the Departmental wish-list: 'These pieces are omitted for two reasons: firstly the V&A already possesses Burges furniture, albeit inferior; secondly, and more important, we felt that giving provincial museums the opportunity of acquiring such major pieces might be a politic display of magnanimity on our part'. At this point Donald King withdrew his Department's expression of interest in a mere two objects, an embroidery after Burne-Jones from the Ionides house and an 1860s shawl signed by Duché et Cie. Pope-Hennessy delivered his directorial verdict on 16th May 1972: Architecture and Sculpture could have all five of their wants and Metalwork all twenty-two of theirs, while Ceramics were allowed all twenty-nine on their 'A-list' (including four objects not in the exhibition, a stained glass panel by Bernard Sleight, vases by Georges de Feure and Georges Hoentschel, and a 1916 dish by A. and H.L. Hopkins) and Furniture and Woodwork their first eleven priorities. It was particularly fortunate that the last of these, an unattributed ebony and ivory Gothic side-table, which was only later identified by Clive Wainwright as having been designed by Sir John Soane for the 'Saxon' library at Stowe, was included. (Fig. 11). The details of these purchases are set out in the Appendix, but here suffice it to note that they added sixty-eight items, or groups, to the sixteen already given, and that the negotiation, conducted through the Estate Duty Office, was completed on 5th June 1972.

On that day Mrs Hodgkinson also informed Peter Thornton that Thomas Stainton was now prepared to offer items for purchase by provincial museums, and 'is favourably inclined towards Bedford and Fitzwilliam (Cambridge) Museums and we understand he will be communicating with them in the first instance'. On 13th June Thornton wrote to all the provincial museums which had shown interest, informing them that the V&A's package was complete and other expressions of interest could now be considered. Although it later emerged that Lavinia had already been in contact with David Piper, the Fitzwilliam Museum's Director, and that Thomas Stainton was, in effect, continuing her negotiation,



II An ebonised mahogany and ivory side table, designed by John Soane, London, circa 1805 for the 'Saxon library' (aka the Gothic Library) at Stowe, Buckinghamshire; purchased from the Handley-Read Collection, V&A, W.32-1972.

it was nonetheless a shock for Peter Thornton, whose coordinating role had been recognised by the solicitors, to learn on 19th June 1972 that the Fitzwilliam had already purchased twenty items from the exhibition, of which the undoubted star was the wonderful chryselephantine Burges decanter illustrated on the front cover of the catalogue. (Fig. 12) Cambridge also secured a Pugin bread plate and a large terracotta relief by George Tinworth, *The Sons of Cydippe*, which had remained at 82 Ladbroke Road, along with eight recent studio pots by Gillian Lowndes, Lucie Rie, Hans Coper (Fig. 13) and Ian Auld, thus representing an under-recognised facet of the Handley-Reads' collecting. Furthermore, Thomas Stainton gave a porcelain and glass table by Mary Keepax and the Friends of the Fitzwilliam a Bernard Leach pot, both also from the house. (5) It was even more of a jolt for Thornton to be informed, on 27th June 1972, that the Trustees of the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery in Bedford, 'have now been able to arrange the purchase of various items from the Handley-Read collection, and accordingly we will not be interested in acquiring any of the balance of the collection remaining available for purchase'. The 'various items' amounted to over two hundred and included the other Burges decanter (illustrated on the back cover of the catalogue), Burges's bed and his wash-stand, the last shown on the poster for the exhibition. Two days after receiving this news Thornton, who had been unaware that, shortly before his death, Charles had been negotiating with the Bedford Trustees to serve as their adviser on furniture acquisitions and that Thomas Stainton was thus building on an existing, if unconsummated, relationship, sent the interested museums new lists identifying the altered state of availability.



**12** A dark green glass decanter mounted with silver, parcel-gilt, set with malachite, semi-precious stones, cameos, and ancient coins, designed by William Burges, the mounts by Josiah Mendelson and George Angell, London, 1865; paid for by Burges from his prize for the (unbuilt) Crimea Memorial Church, Constantinople; purchased from the Handley-Read Collection, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, M.16-1972.



**13** A stoneware vase designed and made by Hans Coper, probably Frome, Somerset, circa 1968; purchased by the Friends of the Fitzwilliam from the Handley-Read Collection, Fitzwilliam Museum, C.36-1972.

The final lap of distribution now ensued. It fell to me to juggle applications and allocations, using a hierarchy of priorities ranging from 'large wants, early in queue' to 'unknown wants, late in queue'. During this process some museums fell by the wayside (Temple Newsam House, Leeds, Cardiff Castle, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, the Museum of London and Stoke-on-Trent City Museum and Art Gallery), but in the end seven institutions benefitted. The process had proved an amicable one: I sent out my draft allocations on 19th July 1972 and, after a short episode of friendly horse-trading, was able on 27th July to send Mrs Hodgkinson of the Estate Duty Office full lists for negotiation, the various packages being tied up by 7th August 1972. There follows a brief characterisation of the purchases (full lists are in the Appendix), with a mention of the curators chiefly involved and a note of the totals paid (55 percent of the valuations):

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (Dennis Farr): including fifty pieces of sculpture, among which were about two-thirds of the New Sculpture section, thus fulfilling Thomas Stainton's expressed wish that this element, mainly Lavinia's creation, should not be scattered to the four winds: £11,744;

Portsmouth Museum and Art Gallery: James Hamilton wrote recently: 'I recall talking to you with the 'phone in one hand and an adding machine in the other. At every pull of the lever the numbers clicked upwards and you said: 'Are you sure you want all this?' 'Yes, yes, we do' and on and on it went ... I don't think the city had ever bought so much so fast.' Included were sixty-three items, mainly ceramics and glass, including a Minton stork fountain, but also chairs by George Walton and two bronze statuettes by Gilbert: £2120;

Holburne of Menstrie Museum, Bath (Mary Holbrook): twenty-nine items, mainly ceramics, but with some glass, furniture and metalwork, and the 'Arts' tapestry by Edward McKnight Kauffer: £2118;

City of Liverpool Museum (Lionel Burman): eleven ceramic and metalwork items from a 1846 Minton jug designed by Henry Cole to a 1905 Liberty cake basket: £273;

Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (Timothy Stevens): Robert Anning Bell, plaster relief, Charity: £110;

Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal (Mary Burkett): a low wardrobe and a games table, both by Gillows (the Judges' Lodgings in Lancaster had not yet opened): £440;

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (Ian Lowe): a last-minute addition, a bookcase made by Peter Waals in 1926 for C.F. Bell, the Ashmolean's first Keeper of Fine Art: £550.

It took a while for objects to be collected and distributed -- I have dim recollections of draughty days spent in Messrs' Bishop's warehouse in Leatherhead -- but on 6th September 1972 I was able to report that everything except a stubborn residue worth about £2,000 had been sold: 'I finally allocated the objects as seemed best, without further consultation, on the basis of the requests provisionally made by the galleries. This course of action seems, fortunately, to have pleased all concerned.' The grand total of purchases by the V&A and provincial institutions was to the value of £123,744 but, thanks to the Estate Duty provisions, they had only cost £55,780. Inflation indices suggest that £1 in 1972 would be worth about £12 in 2015, so the value of the Handley-Read purchases alone was about £1.5 million in today's money; if the gifts were included this sum would be much greater.

As a footnote to this process of distribution it should be mentioned that Thomas Stainton gave Charles's library and working papers to the Royal Institute of British Architects (the former now housed at Portland Place and the latter in the V&A), and on 1st November 1972, Sotheby's Belgravia, which had opened in 1971 and concentrated on Victorian art, sold thirty-two lots from 82 Ladbroke Road which had not been shown in the Royal Academy exhibition, including several Regency lights and a central table (now in Brighton Museum and Art Gallery) and a side table *en suite* with that from the Saxon library at Stowe purchased by the V&A.

An important component of the Handley-Read collection not included in these transactions comprised the paintings, watercolours, drawings and prints. In October 1970 Charles rated five or six paintings as 'fairly important': William Dyce, *Saint John leading Home His Adopted Mother*; John Brett, *Florence from Bellosguardo* (already mentioned as given to the Tate Gallery); G.F. Watts, *Sir Galahad*; Alfred Stevens, *King Alfred and His Mother*; and F. Cayley Robinson, *The Depth of Winter*. It is surprising that he did not mention Richard Dadd, *Mercy, David Spareth Saul's Life*, but he also singled out his Rossetti watercolour, *The Merciless Lady*. At an early stage in the negotiation, when it seemed possible that the paintings, watercolours and drawings might be available, the V&A's twinned Departments of Paintings and of Prints and Drawings selected ten watercolours as desirable, of which Graham Reynolds, then Keeper, fingered the Rossetti and Alma-Tadema's *The Street Altar* as his two priorities. The Tate Gallery went through a similar exercise and picked out thirteen oils, one watercolour (by Simeon Solomon and also on the V&A's list), and Frampton's plaster *Lamia*, now in Birmingham. Nothing came of these careful



**14** *Mercy: David Spareth Saul's Life*, oil on canvas by Richard Dadd, London (Bethlem Hospital), 1854; formerly Handley-Read Collection, purchased from the Stainton family through the Fine Art Society, 1987, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 87.PA.32.



assessments, but two years later, in June 1974, the Fine Art Society mounted a comprehensive exhibition of ‘The Paintings, Water-colours and Drawings from the Handley-Read Collection’ with ninety-seven exhibits, and thus including several works from the Ladbroke Road house which had not been shown at the Royal Academy. The fully illustrated catalogue included an illuminating introduction by Thomas Stainton. The Tate Gallery then took the opportunity to purchase two of its earlier desiderata, Robert Huskisson’s *Titania* (1847) and Maxwell Armfield’s *Oh! Willo! Willo! Willo!* (1902), while the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery bought nine works, including Sir Charles Lock Eastlake’s *Moses and the Daughters of Jethro* (c. 1840), Joseph Paul Pettit’s *The Bed of the Conway* (1858), John Frederick Lewis’s *Entrance to a Harem* (1871), Joseph Crawhall’s *A Lincolnshire Stream* (1882) and Sir John Lavery’s *A View from the Canal, Kelvingrove* (1888); in 1992 they added Joseph Southall’s study for *New Lamps for Old* (1900).

The pressures involved in the distribution of the Handley-Read collection led Thomas Stainton, then aged fifty-four, to retire from active participation in his engineering firm. In 1985 he died, and in 1987 his medal collection was sold by Glendinings, and what was then arguably the greatest painting still in the collection, the Dadd *Mercy, David Spareth Saul’s Life*, was acquired by the J. Paul Getty Museum through the Fine Art Society. (Fig. 14) Another notable late acquisition was the V&A’s purchase in 1993 of the Burne-Jones tapestry, *Angeli Ministrantes*, which had been the frontispiece of the 1972 Royal Academy catalogue.

Although the Royal Academy display of the Handley-Read collection in March to April 1972 was *sui generis*, it should be remembered that it was bracketed by two important V&A exhibitions on Victorian themes. Charles’s advice and participation in ‘Victorian Church Art’ (November 1971 – January 1972), in which his friend Shirley Bury took the lead role, was acknowledged in the catalogue just as it had been in that of her earlier exhibition, ‘Copy or Creation: Victorian Treasures from English Churches’ (Goldsmiths’ Hall, 1967). Indeed, he had been scheduled to speak on William Burges in November 1971 as part of the exhibition programme but, sadly, this was not to be. The second V&A exhibition, ‘Marble Halls, Drawings and Models for Victorian Secular Buildings’ (1973) was organised by John Physick, another of the ‘Victorian Church Art’ protagonists, and Michael Darby. A further V&A exhibition, ‘High Victorian Design’, toured five Canadian cities from November 1974 to June 1975. Organised by the present writer, with Clive Wainwright, and including some ex-Handley-Read objects, it pretended to identify eight principal ingredients of High Victorian design, an anatomical approach which owed much to Charles and which culminated in his own invention, the Geometric Style. The Fine Art Society was also very active: ‘The Aesthetic Movement and the Cult of Japan’ (October 1972), directly inspired by Charles and Lavinia and displaying twenty-five objects from their collection, has already been mentioned. It was rapidly followed by the Society’s ‘The Arts & Crafts Movement, Artists, Craftsmen and Designers, 1890-1930’ (October 1973), which also included some Handley-Read items, including Frank Dobson’s *Pigeon Boy* lent by the Society’s managing director, Andrew McIntosh Patrick.

The extent to which the liveliness of Victorian studies in the 1970s and 1980s was influenced by the Handley-Reads and their collection is difficult to pin down. The ‘canon’ expressed in, for example, the titles of the Fine Art Society’s ‘Architect-Designers, Pugin to Mackintosh’ (May 1981), its catalogue with an introduction by Clive Wainwright, or Fischer Fine Art’s ‘Aspects of Victorian and Edwardian decorative arts: including works designed by Ashbee, Barnsley, Brangwyn, Dresser, Eastlake, Gimson, Jeckyll, Lutyens, Mackintosh, Morris, Pugin’ (October – November 1982), following their ‘William Butterfield, Pioneer of High Victorian Gothic Revival Architecture’ (March – April 1982), would have been entirely familiar to Charles and he would surely have applauded the National Trust’s acquisition of R. Norman Shaw’s *Cragside* in 1977 or Philip Webb’s *Standen* in 1972, the latter thanks to the generosity of Arthur Grogan,



15 A *plique-à-jour* enamel ring tray with opals set in gilt silver, by Eugène Feuillâtre, Paris, circa 1901; shown at the 1902 Turin Exhibition and given from the Handley-Read Collection, V&A, M.24-1972.

a collector in a vein similar to Charles's. (6) Certainly J. Mordaunt Crook's *William Burges and the High Victorian Dream* (1981) was umbilically connected to Charles, but Andrew Saint's *Richard Norman Shaw* (1976) and Alan Crawford's *C. R. Ashbee, Architect, Designer and Romantic Socialist* (1985) lacked any strong linkage. Charles would have been fascinated by and admiring of all three, but perhaps he would have been equally intrigued, at least, by *The Second Empire, Art in France under Napoleon III* (Philadelphia, Detroit, and Paris 1978-9), a monumental exhibition which tackled aspects of design and the decorative arts outside the 'canon' mentioned above. I like to think that he would also have found to his taste the dense V&A gallery, 'Art and Design in Europe and America, 1800-1900', which I organised, again with Clive Wainwright, and which opened in 1985. This consciously paid homage to Charles in eschewing the 'tasteful gap' and in attempting a chronological and anatomical approach to the decorative arts which largely sidestepped 'canonisation'.

In 1972 the V&A's acquisitions from the Handley-Read collection were slotted into its existing displays: only visitors who were close readers of labels would have appreciated the collective enrichment owed to these accessions. Elsewhere the improvements they produced ranged from the incidental to the transformative, as at Portsmouth, but only in Bedford did the Handley-Read contribution possess the scale, diversity and quality – notable in its Burges objects – to constitute an independent entity. Now, in 2015, Handley-Read objects are even less conspicuous, except at Bedford where the Burges element has been progressively reinforced and the collection has recently been redisplayed in a fresh – if under-labelled – arrangement. At the V&A the relatively few Handley-Read objects on display range from the exquisite Feuillâtre *plique-à-jour* enamel dish, now identified as a ring tray, in the Jewellery Gallery (Fig. 15), to a coarse but jolly commercial Reformed Gothic desk chair of about 1870 (Fig. 16), given by Thomas Stainton in 1979 in a tidying-up exercise (not included in the Royal Academy exhibition, it had been overlooked in store), and now displayed in the Dr Susan Weber Gallery of furniture as an example of buttoned upholstery. The Victorian sequence of the British Galleries, opened in 2001, may be considered



**16** A gothic office chair, oak with green leather upholstery, unattributed, probably London, circa 1870; a 'left-over' from the Handley-Read Collection, given by Thomas Stainton, V&A, W.60-1979.

the weakest in terms of clarity and analysis: a few Handley-Read items are present, but there are also absences, such as the austere but noble Holland and Sons bookcase designed by George Edmund Street for his own use, for instance, or the elaborate and eclectic cabinet shown by Gillows at the 1867 Paris Exhibition. Perhaps the Victorian display reportedly planned for the V&A's North Court may at last do justice to the Museum's prodigious collection, including its Handley-Read component.

This long essay has mainly been concerned with the fate of their collection after Charles and Lavinia's suicides. Its impact was indissoluble from theirs. While it was at 82 Ladbrooke Road, it was the magnetic background for the informed and convivial engagements between the worlds of the Royal Academy and of the Victorian Society, of collectors and historians, of dealers in art and antiques, and of the V&A, with an emphasis on the young, over which they presided. The Royal Academy exhibition exposed their achievement and its catalogue recorded it. As noted, any influence in 1972 or afterwards is difficult to calibrate: collectors and collections do not lend themselves to a 'research assessment exercise'. Nonetheless, the quality of individual items aside, the collection's combined range, shape and sense of art-historical vision and purpose are hard to parallel in any of its epigones and, over forty years later, the Handley-Read collection has acquired a mythic status. Indeed, although it was no mirage, and many well remember it at 82 Ladbrooke Road and its part-reincarnation at Burlington House, it is understandable that the brevity of the whole episode and the suddenness and poignancy of Charles and Lavinia's deaths should have conspired to establish their achievement as an extraordinary frozen moment in the history of taste, at once of and -- with hindsight -- in advance of its time.

**SOURCES:**

The principal source for this essay is the V&A Registry file, 'Handley-Read Charles and Lavinia Collection MA/1H500', now held in the V&A Archive at Blythe House. Second in importance has been my own file containing photocopies of correspondence, drafts, etc., taken in 1972. The RIBA Drawings and Archives Collection has produced a good summary calendar (16 pp) of the 43 boxes of Charles Handley-Read Papers now held at the V&A.

**NOTES**

- (1) Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book I, line 263: 'perhaps the Day will come, when even these Misfortunes shall be remembered with Joy'; in C. Davidson, *The Works of Virgil Translated into English Prose*, 4th ed. (London, 1763) I, p.197.
- (2) Henceforward usually 'Charles' and, after her first mention, his wife 'Lavinia' for ease of identification.
- (3) The earliest letter in the V&A's Handley-Read file concerns a visit by John Hayward to 82 Ladbrooke Road in 1964, which prompted his interest, on behalf of the V&A, in two colza oil lamps which Charles decided not to sell.
- (4) Among the lists of his collection made by Charles of which I have photocopies is this entry: 'Kilian Bros (New York, attributed to). Pr of light chairs, sycamore simulating bamboo. See \_\_\_\_\_ no 228. c. (The chairs were part of a group of furniture found in Pb. Rd. which by mutual consent was split up between Simon Jervis, Clive Wainwright & CHR).' The chairs in question (D25 & 26 in the RA Catalogue, which fills out Charles's gap with a full reference to the catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum, New York's 1970 *19th-Century America* exhibition) were purchased by the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery.
- (5) Another illustration of this aspect of the Handley-Read Collection is a walnut and mahogany mirror by Professor David Pye, bought by Charles at the Crafts Centre in 1967, which was given to the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery in 1986 by Andrew McIntosh Patrick in fulfilment of the wishes of Thomas Stainton.
- (6) In a letter to the author of 17th January 1971, Charles wrote: '...Meanwhile, do you know about the Norman Shaw furniture at Cragside? Mark Girouard told me the other evening that Lord Armstrong is now very old and that the house with its contents is unlikely to survive intact after Ld. A's death which could be soon. Mark thought the Shaw furniture was confined to the Dining Room and Library. It consists of chairs, tables, a sideboard, bookshelves and light fittings. The ? Hispano-Mauresque pottery still occupies the positions assigned to the specimens by Shaw himself, or so Mark said. The Dining Room table is evidently in the basement. You may feel that all this is worth bearing in mind'.