



Plate 1. Embroidered altar-cloth, German, dated 1630. Marianne A. Huebner Collection. A copy of
of this piece is on Richard Wagner's piano in Bayreuth.

THE DRAMATIC HISTORY OF A WELL-KNOWN COLLECTION

By
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THIS topic, selected by your president, Mrs. Norris W. Harkness, gives me an opportunity to recall some historical events that occurred during my lifetime. And since – in retrospect – it appears to me that I have had a rather unusual experience, I should like to ask you to follow me back . . . let us say about fifty years.

It is 1911 in Germany – to be exact, in Frankfurt-am-Main, a city rich in the tradition of a democratic administration, very conscious of a long history, and with an unusually fine cultural life.

Growing up as I did, in the home of a physician, whose devoted mission was to serve, to help – and, if possible, to heal, I did not think it was unusual, when, as an eleven year old girl, I was taken by one of my father's friends into fields that he had rented during the wintertime. It was his hobby to sponsor private excavations. I was given a small spade and allowed to dig all by myself. I saw pre-historic objects, as well as Roman glass and pottery, come to light. Important objects were carefully taken into the museum, but minor, little, things, I was allowed to take home . . . So, as a matter of fact, at an age when I was still wrestling with the three R's, I was very much at home and familiar with the thrills of discovering – and collecting.

There was still another facet of interest in my young life. An aunt of mine owned an establishment, that of R. RIESSER, honored with five "By special appointment to . . ." notices, given by royal personages, H.I.H. the Empress Frederick of Germany (daughter of Queen Victoria), H.I.H. the Crown Princess of Prussia, H.M. King Umberto I of Italy, H.R.H. Queen Olga of Württemberg, and H.R.H. King Albert of Saxony. These royalties used my aunt's studio for fine art needlework of any kind for interior decoration. They were joined by a large number of most exclusive clients.

At the turn of the century, quite a noticeable CHANGE IN TASTE had taken place. People had grown tired of Victorian profuseness. A

genuine interest in EARLIER PERIODS AND STYLES came to the fore. This tendency coincided with the newly developed interest in collecting fine art. Paris was still the hub of creation for all fashions, and numerous trips to this fashion metropolis were essential to my aunt's business. As early as about 1900, it appeared to my aunt that she could alter this situation by branching out in a different direction: WHY NOT CREATE A COLLECTION OF ANTIQUE ORIGINAL TEXTILES? This would enable her to offer faithfully done reproductions, or even to furnish her clients with original pieces. With an industrial dynamism, so typical of her generation, she went about this new project. Soon she was a very familiar figure at all important textile auctions. Consultations and exchanges of opinion with museum directors became frequent. She refrained from any association with antique dealers and concentrated exclusively on her private clientèle. And this was a very unusual one – indeed.

THE CHURCH, once second to none as a user of fine textiles, still received important donations from time to time, and frequently provided commissions. In our democratic city, there was no discrimination between the various Christian churches, and commissions from synagogues also came in quite often.

THE COURTS, imperial, royal, and other, did not consider themselves collectors, but rather, as custodians of an inherited wealth of art. Both, however, churches as well as courts, took great pride in having their treasures kept in excellent repair.

INDUSTRIAL and FINANCIAL ARISTOCRATS, who wished to join the two older groups of art sponsors, had sprung up simultaneously in Europe and in the New World. (A situation very much like the early Renaissance.) These PRE-FIRST WORLD WAR TIMES were wonderful. To us, today, they look like a paradise lost.

I – then still at my studies – listened with great awe when I heard about the activities in my aunt's house, which was located next to the finest hotel in town, the Frankfurter Hof. A chamberlain might enter, announcing the intended visit of a royal highness. (At this time, the telephone was a rather unusual commodity and, in any case, not at all "comme il faut.") A deep curtsy had to greet the royal personage, and the 18th century-court language, using the third person singular, was

expected of us. Such visits took place only when our collection was consulted; any other meetings, of course, took place in the castles.

A shipping magnate from Berlin once called up and wished to order antique tapestries to cover his entire dining hall, the work to be done in eight days. We accepted. A night train-ride to Paris, a day's work buying, another night-train trip back home, four days of work by the entire staff of sixty people, another night-train trip to Berlin by four men to install the pieces. . . . and in seven days everything was done. With a sigh of relief, the client could proudly receive his distinguished guests at dinner; among them was the KAISER.

When it came to acquisitions, another occasion is still very vividly in my mind. Dr. Franz Bock, a French priest, had died, leaving a vast collection of Coptic textiles. The collection was offered to my aunt, but it involved a huge investment, almost a gamble. And yet my aunt took it. A great part of the Bock collection is now, VIA our house, in the Museums of Goteborg in Sweden, Darmstadt in Germany, Basel in Switzerland, and many others.

As sure as the month of May brings flowers, so did every spring bring the VISITORS FROM ABROAD. They took rooms at the hotel Frankfurter Hof and came with new ideas every year. One time it was beaded bags, the next year it had to be petitpoint embroidery. In any case, this enlarged the scope of our collection. We had become the collector's collector of antique textiles.

Such was the sparkling picture of the time; then – like lightning – in 1914 the first World War broke out. The Americans were stranded, unable to leave, unable to draw money. We gladly gave them credit, and the hotel management asked them to consider themselves their guests. . . . During the war years, 1914-1918, we somehow carried on with a display of fine textiles in a showcase at the hotel. Most of the precious antique originals remained in storage. Yet the entire staff was paid in full – for knitting socks for the soldiers! By November, 1918, a revolution had broken out. The Spartacists (then the name for Communists) had taken the city and quartered themselves in the hotel next door. By then, I had been an apprentice for over two years and I got anxious about the vitrine at the hotel. I went downtown, and where, only yesterday, the Americans

had lounged leisurely – there stood four big cannons, aimed at the people! Nasty, sinister-looking creatures scared me home. The next morning I succeeded in entering the hotel hall . . . and there was our vitrine and the antique textiles . . . completely intact. Only a filthy cap had been put on top of it. This was my first encounter with the Communists. I already knew then that they had no use for the finer things in life. Our collection, and the city at large, were saved by an ingenious act of the hotel owner. He opened the wine cellars for the Communists, had the waiters serve the finest foods, . . . and so . . . dead drunk . . . and well fed . . . they forgot . . . to loot. But it was really an ugly finale to a very fine era.

With 1918, an entirely new age began. It was meant to have had a lasting impact on the world; there is a strange similarity to another impact exactly three hundred years earlier, when the Thirty Years War broke out in 1618. Perhaps it is not accidental that both events took place in Germany. The next five years were nightmarish. I do not remember how we carried on. The staff was still paid in full. Prices were spiraling into astronomical figures. We would accept any odd job. The collection of fine antique textiles was carefully stored. It would not have occurred to us to part with a single piece, even one which would have brought a very high price. It was a temptation, when one had to pay a million marks – for a loaf of bread. An impressive figure, even today.

After 1924, with the stabilization of money, slowly, very slowly, things came back to normal. There was a thirst for, and a longing to think about, the finer things in life. One had to replace long-worn-out items in the house. The museums were eager to take up where they had left off. A fine flow of work started. Museums did not now acquire new items. We worked on a barter system, by exchanging items. Somehow, there was a fraternity of collectors, and it was a very fine thing indeed. I do not recall any important commissions from the churches at that time; I am convinced that all their means went into healing the war-wounds of the population. Former crowned princes had lost their power and their principalities and had become private people. They were now squires, taking care of their estates. For the first time in history, they joined the ranks of art collectors.

By now, my aunt had passed away, and I was in full charge of the entire establishment, though I was quite young for such a position. The Grand-duke of Hesse, cousin to King George VI of England, came to the house; no more chamberlains, no more curtsies, but, as a matter of courtesy, still the court language. When he saw an unusual embroidery, he asked me what it was. My heart stood still; you see, he was the brother of the late Czarina, just murdered by the Communists, and no-one would ever mention Russia in his presence – and this was a Russian embroidery! Stammering, I said, "I do not know." But he, very kindly, said, "It is Russian," and he even explained the stitch to me. Not all aristocrats were left solvent financially. The Hohenzollerns, the emperor's family, were hardest up. The Kaiser had fled to Holland with the entire family fortune. One of his sisters had to close her castle, live in the coachman's quarters, eat canned food . . . and even had to wear cleaned(!) gloves. One of her sons, Prince Phillip, approached us, ever so quietly, and sold us laces and fine antique textiles. The trade had gone into reverse and we received things from royal inventories. The Kaiser's youngest son, Prince Adalbert, offered us four tablecovers; two were stolen by my staff, but I nevertheless bought all four of them. The American clients came back and were even more welcome than ever before.

Another ten years had slipped by when 1933 brought the Nazis into power. Boastfully, these parvenus played art sponsors, after a fashion. They "requested" everything they wished to have from museums and private collections. This was brazen highway robbery. Our collection was quickly marked, "Models ONLY," and nothing was sold. The ladies imitated the English aristocracy and did a lot of embroidery. An Italian baptismal font-cover, dated 1630, was copied by a Hitler admirer for Frau Wagner's tea-table when the Führer was her guest (Pl. 1). But it ended up as the piano-cover on the instrument that Richard Wagner had played. Frau Ribbentrop did not detect the early Renaissance pattern and took it, with delight, for an ultra-modern set of place-mats. Yes, those times had a comical aspect too. And yet I was not under any delusion; I knew that a disaster was in the making. I applied for a visa to the U.S.A. and happily obtained it rather quickly. But how could I get my collection out of Germany? Summoning up a great deal of courage, I "consulted" the Nazi authorities about the possibility of having enough

“models” to establish a branch in the U.S.A. At that time, the Nazis were under great pressure to get foreign currency and – since “fragments have no cultural value” (!) – I was allowed to take them. My inquiry about lace made the Nazi in charge blush, because he thought that such a thing was used only on ladies’ underwear. I welcomed this hint. My Coptic pieces – after all – were just fragments. And my underwear was “very handsomely trimmed” when I packed it for the trip to the U.S.A. Under the protection of my German sheepdog, in the quiet of the night, I sneaked into the studio and had four hundred photos taken, so that there was a record of the designs. On other nights, I took out some threads, to have a record of the colors. On Friday, January 13th, 1939, I arrived in the U.S.A. with my “fragments and laces.”

But during the war, from 1939 to 1945, my business was under foreign management and I was worried about what would become of the fine collection. When I came to Frankfurt in 1948, I found the city 70% bombed out. Someone gave me the keys to my house . . . but there was no house left. I asked for my collection and got only vacant looks and shrugged shoulders. It came into my mind to tell the Nazis (you know, a cocksure Nazi is an unpleasant person, but a beaten one is an ugly creature) that I would hand in my four hundred photos to the American military government in Germany. Their police force would find my property. Upon which, out came my 16th-century tapestry wall-hangings, which they had hidden by using them as mattresses. American bullets had gone through the “mattresses” and left their marks. This part of the collection was shipped to me in the U.S.A. Other parts of the collection, mainly glass and china, were stored in the cellar, and had partly melted under the terrific heat of the fire caused by bombs. Another section of the collection was stored in a former stable and was in quite good shape. But the bulk of the collection – indeed, the finest items – had been shipped to the eastern part of the country. Hitler himself had ordered that all known collections, listed with the Kulturkammer (Office of Culture), should be stored in safe places. He did not tell the people that the Russians were also moving in, from the east. After the collapse of the Third Reich, nobody had bothered about my case. I had to find the banker in whose care the things were, after I had proved to the Russian authorities then in power there that I was an American. However, I had not taken into ac-

count the mentality of a beaten Nazi. Just because he knew that the owner was an American and – to make matters worse – a former German, he insisted on a bribe of a thousand marks – because his wife needed a vacation! The amount was equal in buying power to \$1000, so I refused to pay. And the banker would not budge.

Years went by and I could not do anything at all. Suddenly, like lightning out of a clear, blue sky, I got word that I was wanted by a young Catholic priest, living in a small town near Frankfurt-am-Main. He, in turn, had been approached by a very young priest in eastern Germany. The Communist government, slowly but surely, had got very much annoyed by the “unmovable” American property (by now, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. were no longer on good terms), so they took everything and gave it as a gift to the Catholic Church. Indeed, there were a large number of fine ecclesiastical pieces, some dating from the early 15th century. But, when the young priest took a closer look at the donation, he was shocked and was dead certain that these were stolen goods. Most carefully, he examined everything and found the name and address of a woman in the small town near Frankfurt. He sent the priest of this town to her and found out that I, an American, was the legal owner of all the property. During another stay in Europe, I contacted the priest as Fraülein Hübner of 27 Kirchberg, Frankfurt-am-Main, concealing, for the sake of his safety, my American citizenship. I offered him whatever he might like to keep for his church, since I was so greatly indebted to him for his efforts to find me. “No,” was the answer, “stolen goods must be returned in full.” I offered to have an entire set of vestments made for his church, as a donation, and again the answer was no. Only some coffee and a bit of shortening could be sent and not returned. I heard through friends that nuns were looking after my collection, but that they were dismayed by the extensive moth damage. Little did they know how old the pieces were!

By now, the relationship between the East Zone (under Russian domination) and West Germany – not to mention the U.S.A. – had reached its lowest ebb, and I had to reconcile myself to the fact that I should never, never see my things again. At least, they were now in excellent hands; not a greedy Nazi, but a priest had charge of them.

And again, after another seven years, like lightning from a clear, blue sky, I got word . . . this time from a forwarding house in Frankfurt-am-Main. A huge shipment had arrived for me; its origin was not disclosed. I wondered if it could be from East Germany and hoped that that it might be. I had it forwarded to me. The huge case arrived here, in New York, at the end of 1960, only months before the ill-famed wall went up in Berlin and NO communication was left between East and West. The emotional shock was great. For almost two weeks I could not get myself to open the case. And when I finally broke the lid open . . . I thought myself in a dungeon – so penetrating was the odor coming from the case. Twelve long years the collection had been hidden in moist cellars. With trembling hands, I took the pieces out, one by one. There was no moth damage at all; it was the deterioration of age. And I remembered them well, just as they were now. With German orderliness, my staff had made an exact inventory before the shipment, and, from fear of being caught by the American Military Police, they had given this inventory to me. And when I checked it with the contents of the case – not a single piece was missing.

But I did not know, and I never shall know, HOW ON EARTH DID THE YOUNG PRIEST SMUGGLE THE THINGS OUT? My attempts to contact the priest and the nuns again . . . were fruitless. They pretended NEVER TO HAVE HEARD FROM ME, or ABOUT ME, or of ANYTHING BELONGING TO ME. I was assured that it must all be a mistake on my part. Yes, today – as matters now stand – it might be best to leave everything like this. It is still a miracle to me that I really have these fine things back in my possession . . . here in New York.

Greed, spite, political ambition (on the right or on the left) had woven a sinister wreath of thorns – like barbed wire – around my collection. Yet the strength of a deeply religious, active young man, in a courageous way, had done away with it completely. WHAT a lesson! Now, with the wall up, it is a breath-taking thought to me that, had the priest not hurried . . . it would have been too late. TOO LATE FOR EVER! Not only human beings have sought – and found – refuge in the U.S.A., to escape the horrors of annihilation, but, in my case, even a fine collection of antique textiles sought for the same way out, and succeeded in finding it.