

Collecting Medieval Treasures

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As a late medievalist who has recently moved to Scotland, I was disappointed to learn that the Burrell Collection in Glasgow – home to the many medieval treasures once owned by the shipping magnate and prolific collector, William Burrell – is closed over the next two years. This is for an extensive renovation, which will see the gallery space and its facilities improved, and the collection re-interpreted. Fortunately, in the meantime, highlights from the collection are being showcased in a series of exhibitions at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. ‘Collecting Medieval Treasures’, which is on until the end of May 2019, is the latest in this series.

If you were to visit Kelvingrove without knowing about the exhibition, you would be forgiven for missing it. Nestled between two larger galleries, it occupies an unassuming corner of the museum. Once your eye catches a glimpse of the treasures within, however, it is impossible not to be drawn towards the panoply of colours and textures. Panel paintings, tapestries, stained glass, alabaster, ceramics, wooden sculptures and metalwork come together to showcase Burrell’s love of late medieval European art in all its forms – the objects ranging from a tiny ivory chess piece to monumental stained-glass windows from a German convent.

The exhibition’s aims are twofold. It is, of course, designed to whet the appetite for the Burrell Collection’s grand reopening in 2020. Yet, it also tells the story of Burrell’s motivations and legacy as a collector. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the principal curator of the exhibition and former chairman of the V&A in London, Sir Paul Ruddock, is himself a renowned collector of medieval art and objects. What the visitor is presented with is therefore a view of the later middle ages which is self-consciously filtered through the lenses of two collectors from the 20th and 21st centuries. This is apparent in the exhibition’s labels – not to mention its title – which focus more on Burrell’s process and reasons for acquiring objects than on their original context and purpose.

Ruddock was tasked with the enviable job of selecting what he considers to be the gems of Burrell’s collection. The objects displayed are thus a fraction of the staggering 9,000 items which Burrell and his wife, Constance, gifted to the city of Glasgow in 1944. In the exhibition, some objects are presented by type, while others are thematically arranged. The side-by-side display of certain objects is used to emphasise Burrell’s tenacity as a collector and his penchant for upgrading and comparing items by type. One exhibition case, for example, contains three painted tabernacles enclosing alabaster heads of John the Baptist, all from late-15th-century England. Acquired by Burrell over 40 years, they are three of only five known surviving examples of this type of object. One can almost imagine the collector’s simultaneous sense of joy and

disappointment at obtaining all but two of these objects (if indeed he knew about the others), for we quickly learn that Burrell – fuelled by a fiercely competitive streak – kept an eagle-eyed watch on the market. Another nearby case shows three lion-shaped aquamaniles or pouring vessels of varying quality. Rather than selling off items as he upgraded, we are told that Burrell preferred to retain and compare objects of the same type. The collection thus provides a unique window onto objects produced for medieval consumers of varying wealth and status.

Although Burrell sought out multiple versions of the same type of object or iconography, he also cast his net widely, aiming to buy up at least one work from each key genre of medieval art. Particular object types also appear to have sparked his interest at different moments. While he was mainly preoccupied with tapestries in the early decades of the 20th century, his gift of his collection to the city of Glasgow in 1944 fuelled an interest in European ceramics, resulting in his purchase of almost 600 pieces in the space of just four years. A handful from the Spanish village of Manises in Valencia, which are variously decorated with secular and religious iconography, occupy a single case in the exhibition, their glazed hues – white, blue, bronze and brown – forming a striking contrast with the other objects displayed.

The exhibition presents Burrell's approach to collecting as immersive and all-encompassing. We are told that he regularly visited medieval buildings in Paris to see items in situ, and that he also enjoyed medieval pursuits, including chess and hunting, at his early 16th-century home on the Scottish Borders, Hutton Castle. Falconry accessories, including a glove, hood, hobble and bells, are displayed alongside tapestries worked with hunting scenes. One label reads that Burrell 'would have been able to conjure up the sounds, smells and sights of these scenes, and to imagine the hawking gear he collected in actual use'. In the case displaying the lion-shaped aquamaniles, discussed above, we are invited to observe the wax stains clinging to one of these objects; evidence that Burrell once used it as a candle stick.

Several objects are shown alongside descriptions and photographs which are illustrative of their display at Hutton Castle. Purchased in 1916 and inhabited by Burrell and his family from 1927 onwards, Hutton provided the perfect setting for his ever-growing collection. We learn that a late 13th-century stained glass panel of Beatrix van Valkenburg (d.1277), the third wife of Richard of Cornwall, King of the Romans, found a fitting home in a window on the stairs leading to Burrell's bedchamber, its location poignantly commemorating the fact that Beatrix's stepson had slept at Hutton the night before he died at the Battle of Berwick in 1296.

Burrell's use of objects to link past and present also found expression in his commission of new pieces based on medieval designs. Ahead of the birth of their only daughter, Marion, in 1903, he and Constance commissioned a medieval-style cradle from the architect Robert Lorimer. In the exhibition, a black and white image of the cradle is shown alongside a doll-like figure of the Virgin and Child (c.1510), which was acquired by Burrell around the time of his marriage to Constance. Also displayed in this case is a miniature, intricately carved wooden cradle (1480–1500), which is still saturated with generous lashings of gold paint. Originally intended to house a statuette of the infant Christ, the object was once a devotional focal point for the nuns of a South Netherlandish convent, who would have cared for the doll as though it were the real Christ-child. A representation of a *pietà* carved at the end of the cradle is particularly emotive, encouraging the viewer to forge a connection between the Virgin's joy as a mother to the infant Christ and her suffering 33 years later as she cradled her dead son – this time in her arms – after the Crucifixion. Peering through the glass at this beautiful object, I could imagine the nuns transfixed in their devotions, and also Burrell, over 400 years later, transfixed as a collector.

What emerges from this exhibition is a view of Burrell as a meticulous, competitive and highly-driven individual. In his tastes, he was a man of his time. His obsession with late medieval art – often dismissed as crude or primitive in today's classrooms and art markets – speaks of an age of where interest in the middle ages was flourishing among artists and collectors who sought to define their present through reference to the medieval past. Yet, Burrell's drive as a collector appears to have been exceptional. One of two purchase books displayed at the beginning of the exhibition includes his purchase in 1935 of a *David and Bathsheba*

tapestry, which the visitor later encounters on the other side of the room. The label tells of how alongside his purchases, Burrell recorded notes on the condition, ownership and provenance of items, as well as recommendations for further reading. He also used these books to relate his acquisitions to personal and national events, from his purchase of utilitarian items, such as a vacuum cleaner, to the declaration of war. For Burrell, these extraordinary objects were enmeshed in his everyday experiences of life on both a domestic and national scale.

A label below a marvellous late 15th-century Netherlandish tapestry of peasants preparing to hunt rabbits with ferrets explores Burrell's opportunistic streak. Burrell purchased the tapestry when the impoverished American tycoon, William Randolph Hearst, was forced to sell off parts of his collection in the late 1930s. Unfortunately, a focus on this leaves little room for comment on the sheer magnificence of the tapestry's design or iconography, which shows lively figures and animals weaving in and out of an abundance of trees and foliage. Burrell, we are told, was also strategic, sending others to bid at auctions on his behalf (so as to avoid inflation) and tracking down objects over several years. Two panel paintings displayed at the beginning of the exhibition are used to make this point. Dating from the third quarter of the 15th century, Burrell acquired the paintings — one of the Virgin Annunciate and the other the Flight into Egypt — ten years apart. At the time he had believed them to be part of single altarpiece by the Early Netherlandish painter, Hans Memling, although more recent research has shown otherwise. Nonetheless, the panels are two of only six associated with this particular follower of Memling, their example again illustrating Burrell's determination and perseverance over the long course of his collecting career.

If Burrell had a competitive streak, he was also driven by emotion. In the exhibition case centred on Marion's birth, we are told that many of William's purchases speak of his relationship with his wife, Constance. A photograph included in one of the opening panels to the exhibition shows Constance looking on as William signs the paperwork relating to his receipt of the Freedom of the City of Glasgow in 1944. Despite her name being mentioned a handful of times throughout the exhibition, she nonetheless remains an elusive figure in its narrative. One wonders what she thought of their home, Hutton Castle, filled to the brim with late medieval art and objects of every kind, or of the staggering sums spent by her husband on new acquisitions. One can almost imagine the scene when Burrell, too impatient to wait for a Netherlandish oak statue of St. Catherine of Alexandria (c.1490–1500) to be delivered to their newly-renovated castle, had it sent directly from a Paris auction house to their temporary accommodation in Dunbar. Perhaps Constance shared her husband's obsessive fascination with the middle ages, or perhaps she merely indulged him.

A serene grey veined alabaster sculpture of the Virgin and child, sizable and impressive enough to merit its own case, is used to highlight the sheer extent of Burrell's expenditure on art and objects. In the year he bought the alabaster, Burrell spent over £79,000 (over £5 million in today's money) on his collection. An oddly placed sentence at the end of the exhibition label assures us that William and Constance also gave generously to charities across Scotland, as though anticipating a few raised eyebrows at the fact that Burrell continued to spend large amounts on his collection, even in times of depression and post-war austerity.

A defining characteristic of this exhibition is its seeming lack of a star object. A stained-glass panel of King Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville's daughter, Princess Cecily (d.1507), originally from the windows of the north-west transept of Canterbury Cathedral (c.1482–7) and reproduced on the cover of the slim yet informative exhibition catalogue, is a strong contender. As is a stunning alabaster *Pietà* from the school of 'The Rimini Master' (1450–75), the Virgin's pain almost palpable as she tenderly gazes upon the emaciated body of her only son. Burrell's gift of this *Pietà* to the city of Glasgow made it the first of its type to be gifted to a UK museum (the V&A in London, by comparison, did not acquire their first *Pietà* until 1960). A Parisian ivory mirror case showing the Castle of Love (c.1340) is also worthy of note, its lively and intricately carved scene showing female spectators looking on from the castle ramparts as knights joust below. Displayed in a busy case of metalwork and ivory, the mirror case's beauty could easily be overlooked. The use of the word 'treasures' in the exhibition's title does not mislead: a great many of the items displayed are worthy of star object status.

At one point, I found myself completely alone in the exhibition. As my eyes darted from tapestries and panel paintings to tableware and alabasters, I found it almost impossible to choose a favourite piece. Eventually, I settled on the little cradle from the Netherlandish convent discussed above. For me, the piece not only spoke to my interests as a gender historian researching women's uses of space and material culture, but also seemed to capture my image of Burrell's childlike wonder of all things late medieval.

While the exhibition does a great job of explaining Burrell's timeline and motivations as a collector, I did wonder what the non-specialist visitor, not versed in the strange medieval world of chivalry, saintly relics and affective piety, might take away from an encounter with these beautiful yet unfamiliar objects, aside from Burrell's fascination with them. Perhaps they will tell a different story when they return to the new and improved Burrell Collection in two years' time. We will just have to wait and see. In the meantime, medievalists like myself can remain contented in the knowledge that these objects are not hidden away in storage, but continue to provide a unique window, not only onto one man's extraordinary collection, but also onto the medieval past in all its strangeness and splendour.

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