

## 'Life was a spectacle for her': Lady Dorothy Nevill as Art Collector, Political Hostess, and Cultural Philanthropist

Caroline McCaffrey-Howarth

Writing a grief-stricken epitaph to Lady Dorothy Nevill née Walpole in 1913, the English poet and then librarian of the House of Lords, Edmund Gosse observed, 'life was a spectacle for her and society a congress of little guignols.'<sup>1</sup> Gosse conjures up an image of Lady Dorothy as a master manipulator, pulling the strings of her many puppets over the years, thus suggesting the influential position this aristocratic woman held in society throughout her long life.

Born into the historical dynasty of the Walpole family, Lady Dorothy (1826–1913) was the daughter of the 3rd Earl of Orford (1783–1858). She grew up at Wolterton Hall reading the correspondence of Lord Horatio Walpole, the one-time ambassador to Louis XV, and stated proudly that 'like my kinsman Horace Walpole I am fond of collecting'.<sup>2</sup> Lady Dorothy gained acclaim as a botanist, a political hostess, one of the founding members of the Conservative Primrose League, an art collector, and a supporter of writers, scholars, and artists, many of whom she patronized.

In 1888 she was painted in the company of a who's who of the Victorian art world including John Charles Robinson (1824–1913), John Ruskin (1819–1900), and the art dealer William Agnew (1825–1910), attending the private view of the old masters exhibition at the Royal Academy (*Fig. 1*). As historian Jonathan Schneer has observed, 'the range of her contacts and the extent of her political knowledge were unsurpassed.'<sup>3</sup> A keen letter writer, who kept a journal throughout her life, she immortalized herself in a variety of publications: *The Reminiscences of Lady Dorothy Nevill* (1906), *Leaves from the Note-Books of Lady Dorothy Nevill* (1907), *Under Five Reigns* (1910), and *My Own Times* (1912).<sup>4</sup> Although at times anecdotal, these writings contain diary entries, letters, newspaper clippings, and thoughts on politics, museums, and the significant changes experienced by Victorian society.

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Gosse, *Lady Dorothy Nevill: An Open Letter* (London: Chiswick Press, 1913), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *The Reminiscences of Lady Dorothy Nevill*, ed. by Ralph Nevill (London: Nelson, 1920), pp. 368, 233.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> After her death, her son Ralph Nevill also edited another volume entitled *The Life & Letters of Lady Dorothy Nevill* (London: Dutton, 1919).



Fig. 1: Henry Jamyn Brooks, *Private View of the Old Masters Exhibition*, Royal Academy, 1888, 1889, oil on canvas, 154.5 × 271.5 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG 1833. © National Portrait Gallery, London (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0).

A passionate art collector, Lady Dorothy amassed a significant collection of ceramics, furniture, paintings, ironworks, and antique books. Nevertheless, she has been largely overlooked in the history of collecting and her role in Victorian philanthropy has received no attention. This is perhaps further encouraged by the fact that up until the 1860s her husband Reginald Nevill was credited with her art collection, and that, due to posthumous auctions, her collection is now completely dispersed. At the celebrated 1862 Special Loans Exhibition at the South Kensington Museum, Lady Dorothy was finally listed as an art collector in her own right. Committed to artistic education, and keen to assert her position, from this moment onwards she actively loaned objects for temporary exhibition and permanent display across various museums, culminating in a significant loan bequest of ironwork to the South Kensington Museum in the 1890s. Yet she has been marginalized in scholarship, eradicated from museum memory, and perceived merely as a nostalgic collector of historical mementoes and ceramics, objects traditionally perceived to be more ‘feminine’.<sup>5</sup> In

<sup>5</sup> In *Women in the Victorian Art World*, Ann Eatwell dedicates only one sentence to Lady Dorothy; and in *Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels*, Lady Dorothy is mentioned only once, relegated to a footnote, as another typical aristocratic woman collector of ceramics. See Ann Eatwell, ‘Private Pleasure, Public Beneficence: Lady Charlotte Schreiber and Ceramic Collecting’, in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. by Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 125–45 (p. 127); Moira Vincentelli, *Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 130. See also, Terri Baker, ‘The Record of a Life: Nation and Narrative in Victorian Women’s Collections’, in *Contemporary Collecting: Objects, Practices, and the Fate of Things*, ed. by Kevin M. Moist and David Banash (Lanham: Scarecrow, 2013), pp. 172–92 (p. 179).

*Great Women Collectors* Lady Dorothy is reprimanded by Charlotte Gere and Marina Vaizey for only collecting ‘worthless junk’.<sup>6</sup> Such an assertion, however, undermines the significance of her art collection, especially her role as a ceramics connoisseur, who also subverted gendered notions of taste by acquiring a highly celebrated collection of antique English ironwork.<sup>7</sup> In fact, as we shall see, contemporaries would soon respect Lady Dorothy for her connoisseurial expertise, especially for eighteenth-century French porcelain and English ironwork.

Through her role as an art collector, political hostess, and cultural philanthropist, Lady Dorothy straddled the various spheres of elite Victorian society. As both Frank Prochaska and Andrea Geddes Poole have acknowledged, charitable philanthropy enabled Victorian women to move beyond the domestic sphere of the home and acquire their own individual identity in the public realm.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, aristocratic women during this time were encouraged to dedicate themselves to philanthropic endeavours; many even saw it as their ‘rightful mission’.<sup>9</sup> However, Lady Dorothy does not appear to have desired such public ratification for her more traditional charitable endeavours. As her son once admitted, she was ‘deeply interested in philanthropy of an unobtrusive kind. In a quiet way she worked a good deal among the poor’ (*Life & Letters*, p. 298). For example, she created a school for poor girls in Surrey so that they could be educated for free, and once they were old enough she would personally place them in suitable employment.<sup>10</sup> Every week she also went to the London Hospital, an action which again was little known by her contemporaries.<sup>11</sup>

Bearing this in mind, this article underlines Lady Dorothy’s engagement as a cultural philanthropist. Geoffrey Ginn has suggested that the notion of cultural philanthropy can be considered as distinctly

<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Gere and Marina Vaizey, *Great Women Collectors* (New York: Abrams, 1999), pp. 89–91.

<sup>7</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the Sèvres porcelain acquired by Lady Dorothy, see Caroline McCaffrey-Howarth, ‘Reclaiming Her Scandalous Past: Lady Dorothy Nevill (née Walpole) as a Collector of Sèvres Porcelain’, *French Porcelain Society Journal*, 7 (2018), 203–27.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Geddes Poole, *Philanthropy and the Construction of Victorian Women’s Citizenship: Lady Frederick Cavendish and Miss Emma Cons* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Leaves from the Note-Books of Lady Dorothy Nevill*, ed. by Ralph Nevill ([n.p.]: Echo Library, 2019), p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Lady Dorothy advocated to her readers that ‘in all our vast metropolis there is no charitable institution more worthy of support and encouragement than the London Hospital’. See Lady Dorothy Nevill, *My Own Times*, ed. by [Ralph Nevill] (London: Methuen, 1912), p. 283.

‘late-Victorian’ as it evolved as a means of social reform.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, art historian Frances Borzello has observed that cultural philanthropy led to a better appreciation of art, which in turn encouraged urban society to undergo moral reform.<sup>13</sup> Taking up this idea, I argue that Lady Dorothy’s approach as a cultural philanthropist was underpinned by her belief in the power of art as a way of achieving social and moral amelioration. As an antiquarian deeply interested in history, who was actually present at the first meetings when the idea of the South Kensington Museum was discussed, it should come as no surprise that throughout her long life she dedicated herself to cultural education.

In particular, Lady Dorothy was good friends with both Sir Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave, key figures behind the formation of the South Kensington Museum (*Reminiscences*, p. 255). The museum had opened in 1857 under the Board of Education as an extension of the government’s mission to educate the working classes and improve standards of taste.<sup>14</sup> Writing to the historian Frederic Harrison, Lady Dorothy announced that she spent time ‘improving my mind by going to the Museums, etc. After all that is the best education, and I have profited by it all my life’ (*Life & Letters*, p. 276). John Ruskin, for example, argued that the museum was ‘not at all a place of entertainment, but a place of Education’.<sup>15</sup> In many ways Lady Dorothy’s lifelong commitment to cultural education, especially in relation to the salvage of pre-industrial craft as embodied in her ironwork collection, also reveals a Ruskinian understanding of the museum.<sup>16</sup>

Often scholarship has favoured the collecting narratives of Joséphine Bowes (1825–1874) and Charlotte Schreiber (1812–1895), two women of somewhat lower (albeit different) classes, who both collected decorative

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey A. C. Ginn, *Culture, Philanthropy and the Poor in Late-Victorian London* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 3. Similarly, Anne Anderson and Elizabeth Darling have considered the social work of Octavia and Miranda Hill as cultural philanthropy. See Anne Anderson and Elizabeth Darling, ‘The Hill Sisters: Cultural Philanthropy and the Embellishment of Lives in Late-Nineteenth Century England’, in *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870–1950*, ed. by Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 51–68.

<sup>13</sup> Frances Borzello, *Civilising Caliban: The Misuse of Art 1875–1980* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), pp. 32–39.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara J. Black, *On Exhibit: Victorians and Their Museums* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), p. 10; Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: History of the Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World’s Fairs, 1851–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> *John Ruskin’s Works*, St Mark’s Edition, 27 vols (Boston: Estes, 1899), ix: *Fors Clavigera*, vol. III, 66.

<sup>16</sup> As Kate Hill has discussed, Ruskinian approaches to culture enabled a new space for women within museums. See Kate Hill, *Women and Museums, 1850–1914: Modernity and the Gendering of Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), p. 196.

arts alongside their husbands.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, Gere and Vaizey have acknowledged that Lady Dorothy ‘probably made as great an impact, if not a greater one, in her own time than Lady Charlotte Schreiber’ (p. 89). Certainly, Lady Dorothy does not fall into the usual category of such women collectors; she collected by herself and not alongside her husband; nor did she make a bequest to a museum in their name, such as Schreiber. With this in mind, this article seeks to award Lady Dorothy her rightful place in the history of collecting and situates her within a wider context of women’s engagement with art collecting and cultural philanthropy during this time. It examines the different ways in which she acted in the ‘enlarged public sphere’ of the Victorian art world, uncovering her agency as an art collector, exhibition lender, and museum benefactress. In doing so, it traces her journey from the scandals of her youth to her position as a legitimate collector, seeking, and eventually gaining, public recognition and scholarly acclaim. Additionally, it examines the extent to which she exercised a commitment to cultural and historical education through a determination to salvage the past and contribute to moral and design reform through her role as a cultural philanthropist.

### A faux pas with a Tory MP

While travelling in Italy during the summer of 1844, 18-year-old Lady Dorothy was painted by G. F. Watts (1817–1904) (*Fig. 2*). From this moment onwards, she captured the attention of elite Victorian London society, even dancing frequently with Napoleon III (1808–1873), who she admitted made her ‘laugh very much’ (*Reminiscences*, pp. 68–69). However, her reputation was soon irrevocably damaged by a scandalous love affair with a Tory MP. In 1846 Lady Dorothy was caught in a summerhouse in the arms of the Conservative politician and then undersecretary for private affairs, George Smythe, the 7th Viscount Strangford (1818–1857).<sup>18</sup> They quickly eloped to Brighton for at least ten days but soon it became clear that Smythe had never had any intention of marrying Lady Dorothy. On their return and for months afterwards, Lady Dorothy avoided public attention, with many assuming she would soon give birth to an illegitimate child. Her ‘untoward event’ and ‘faux pas’ received a great deal of criticism in various newspapers.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Charlotte Schreiber was born an aristocrat but later married into an industrial family, and Joséphine Bowes was a daughter of a clockmaker and an actress.

<sup>18</sup> Mary S. Millar, *Disraeli’s Disciple: The Scandalous Life of George Smythe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 215.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, *Blackburn Standard*, 7 October 1846, p. 2.



Fig. 2: G. F. Watts, *Portrait of Lady Dorothy Walpole*, 1844, oil, private collection, *Connoisseur*, 2 (March 1902), frontispiece.

Not only did contemporaries believe she was pregnant, but rumours had also spread to suggest that this was not her first dalliance, and as such the father of the child remained unknown. As one newspaper commented, ‘perhaps the worst feature about the business is, that reparation [of Smythe] is denied on the score of the ascribed paternity being somewhat equivocal.’<sup>20</sup> Other reports suggest that she was possibly forced into an induced abortion by her parents, who reported in the *Morning Post* that she had been ‘a prisoner to her room some days, owing to a fall her Ladyship received while riding a few weeks since’.<sup>21</sup> The psychological and emotional

<sup>20</sup> Printed in several newspapers on 17 October 1846 including, *London Correspondent of the Liverpool Albion*, *Leeds Times*, *Londonderry Standard*, *Galway Mercury*, and *Connaught Weekly Advertiser*.

<sup>21</sup> *Morning Post*, 5 October 1846, p. 5. During the Victorian era, horse riding was often used by the upper classes as a method of inducing miscarriage. For example, in *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence* by Alfred Taylor (first published in 1844) it was noted that ‘violent agitation of the body, as by [horse] riding or driving over a rough pavement’ caused ‘criminal’ abortion. See Alfred Swaine Taylor, *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence*, 9th edn (London: Churchill, 1874), p. 490.

trauma of this tumultuous experience and its consequences must have impacted significantly on the young Lady Dorothy.

Furthermore, she was also ostracized from court by Queen Victoria, one of the greatest social disgraces that could befall an aristocratic woman. The following year she was forced to marry a distant cousin, Reginald Nevill (1807–1878), who was twenty years her senior and also related to the Walpoles. Reginald had recently inherited a large fortune courtesy of his Uncle ‘Adonis’ Walpole, which perhaps made their marriage all the more bearable, and certainly must have financed her collecting of decorative art.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, scandalous rumours continued to abound, and it is now believed that she fathered an illegitimate child with Disraeli, thought to be her firstborn son.<sup>23</sup> Despite the scandal of another faux pas, the marriage was a turning point in her life. She continued to move in the higher echelons of society, although no longer permitted at public royal gatherings; she had the marital status and money to reclaim her social position, and soon turned her attention to self-fashioning a new identity.

A few years after her marriage, a portrait from 1855 shows Lady Dorothy smiling directly at the viewer, dressed in a sumptuous, embroidered gown in the style of the eighteenth century (*Fig. 3*). As one contemporary noted, ‘she invariably resembles more an old picture stepped from its frame.’<sup>24</sup> She sits by a silver-glass toilette service, a Louis XV *chaise en cabriolet*, a rococo ormolu-mounted wall clock, and a painted screen with elaborate botanical designs. By this stage Lady Dorothy had regained control and distanced herself from the scandals of her youth. Already an established Conservative political hostess, she had also amassed a significant collection of exotic birds and carnivorous plants, and was even attempting to farm silkworms at her new country house estate in Dangstein, Sussex (*Fig. 4*).

In many ways Lady Dorothy defies categorization. Her dedication to scientific discovery and interest in the emerging theories of evolution, which she discussed avidly with figures including Charles Darwin and the biologist St George Jackson Mivart, were somewhat at odds with her writings which are riddled with a sense of mourning for the past. As she once exclaimed, ‘anything which recalls the past becomes of interest as time goes on, and some of the mementoes of other days which I have carefully preserved bring vividly back to one’s mind scenes now almost historical’ (*Leaves*, p. 9). Frequently, guests at her political salons were greeted by

<sup>22</sup> *Reminiscences*, p. 74. Her financial position remained secure and on her husband’s death in 1878 she received a significant sum of £22,551 13s. Lady Dorothy Nevill, Board of Stamps File, Kew, National Archives, IR 59/394.

<sup>23</sup> T. A. Jenkins, *Disraeli and Victorian Conservatism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> *Warminster & Westbury Journal, and Wilts County Advertiser*, 18 October 1890, p. 6.



Fig. 3: Henry Richard Graves, *Portrait of the Lady Dorothy Nevill*, 1855, oil on panel, 25.5 × 20 cm, private collection. © Bonhams, New York.

a footman dressed in historical livery, and she would receive them in full eighteenth-century attire.

Notably, she was committed to a scholarly understanding of history, and confessed to her own 'great antiquarian interest' (*Leaves*, p. 153). By 1858 she became one of the earliest women members of the Sussex Archaeological Society, and in 1894 wrote a much celebrated history of the family entitled *Mannington and the Walpoles, Earls of Orford*.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, she was also a celebrated horticulturist and botanist. Sir William Hooker of Kew honoured her in 1857 when he dedicated a volume of *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* to her.<sup>26</sup> Extracts of her scholarly scientific work on insects, silkworms, and exotic plants appeared in contemporary publications such as *The Year-Book*

<sup>25</sup> 'Members', *Sussex Archaeological Collections Relating to the History and Antiquities of the County*, 10 (1858), p. xxi.

<sup>26</sup> *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, 3rd ser., 13 (1857), p. 1.





Fig. 4: Dangstein, Sussex, south front of house, now demolished, date unknown, photograph from the 1926 sales details. © West Sussex Record Office.

of *Facts in Science and Art* in 1863 and in *Nature and Art* in 1866.<sup>27</sup> On several occasions Darwin sought out her knowledge, and she sent him samples of ‘curious plants to experimentalize upon’ (*Life & Letters*, p. 56). Meanwhile, he expressed his gratitude to her for putting her ‘magnificent collection of Orchids at my disposal’.<sup>28</sup> Such an intellectual and systematic approach to botany and natural history runs parallel with her role as an antiquarian interested in an archaeological understanding of the past and committed to the preservation of history through collecting.

This dialectic between the old and the new, in many ways symptomatic of the fast-changing sociocultural fabric of the Victorian era as a whole, indicates that Lady Dorothy was certainly a character full of contradictions. This is further revealed in her role as a Conservative political hostess. Frequently, she engaged Liberals such as William Gladstone and Lady Waldegrave in rigorous debate, much to the displeasure of her fellow Tories.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, although she was somewhat sceptical of the idea of the suffragette movement, she wanted women to be more equal.<sup>30</sup> On one

<sup>27</sup> ‘New Silkworms’, in John Timbs, *The Year-Book of Facts in Science and Art* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1863), pp. 238–41; W. B. Tegetmeier, ‘The Ailanthus Silkworm, and Its Culture in England’, *Nature and Art*, June 1866, pp. 14–15.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Various Contrivances by which British and Foreign Orchids are Fertilised by Insects* (London: Murray, 1862), p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> In fact, Lady Dorothy was in direct competition with the Liberal hostess Lady Waldegrave. Although Waldegrave was another woman who had also managed to overcome scandal in her life and rise above it, she was lambasted by Lady Dorothy as a ‘conspicuous instance, for she attained the social position she occupied by sheer determination and character’ (*Life & Letters*, p. 184).

<sup>30</sup> Lady Dorothy Nevill, *Under Five Reigns*, ed. by [Ralph Nevill], 4th edn (London: Methuen, 1910), p. 160.

occasion she wrote to Millicent Fawcett to congratulate her on a procession held in London in 1908, saying ‘it was all too wonderful’.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the Primrose League, known as ‘the first body to recognise the usefulness of women in politics’, was an idea that originated at Lady Dorothy’s weekly Sunday political salon.<sup>32</sup> As we shall see, this dedication to the role of women as cultural and political agents in society is further revealed through her contemporary patronage of women artists. Overall, a closer examination of Lady Dorothy indicates a much more complex and nuanced character than acknowledged previously. Against this background let us now reconsider her role as an art collector during the mid to late Victorian era.

### Gaining recognition as a collector

In 1902 Lady Dorothy was invited to present her art collection in one of the first ever editions of the *Connoisseur*, an illustrated magazine which celebrated contemporary collectors. In the article she acknowledged that she collected objects ‘by reason of their intrinsic beauty, their historic interest, or reputed rarity’.<sup>33</sup> She would later admit that ‘I can lay no claim to being the owner of a regular collection’ (*Leaves*, p. 286). From 1842 onwards she attended auctions frequently, some of which made a great impression on her, including those of Strawberry Hill in 1842, Lady Blessington in 1849, and Ralph Bernal in 1855. Dedicated to refining her own taste, Lady Dorothy spent time visiting museums, dealer shops, and auction houses, both in England and across the Channel, delighting especially in the Great Exhibition of 1851 (*Leaves*, p. 258). Among her immediate network, she established good working relationships with dealers in London such as John Webb, William Forrest, an ‘importer and dealer in curiosities’, and the Davis family who were trading as curiosity dealers from the 1850s onwards.<sup>34</sup> Lady Dorothy was determined to train her connoisseurial eye, admitting that ‘one of the best ways of learning how to distinguish the good from the bad is to make a practice of frequenting Christie’s, [...] a constant attendance at these famous auction-rooms becomes an artistic education in itself’ (*Reminiscences*, p. 237).

By her own admission Lady Dorothy revealed that ‘the best things in my possession are French’ (‘My Collection’, p. 151). In fact, she dedicated

<sup>31</sup> Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *What I Remember* (London: Fisher, Unwin, 1924), p. 191.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Krista Cowman, *Women in British Politics, c. 1689–1979* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> Lady Dorothy Nevill, ‘My Collection’, *Connoisseur*, 2 (1902), 151–56 (p. 151).

<sup>34</sup> For example, she commented that Charles Davis, who took over the family business towards the end of the nineteenth century and became one of the chief art advisers to the Rothschild family, possessed ‘a perfectly unique knowledge of French art’ (*Leaves*, p. 117, n. 7).

herself to a scholarly pursuit of the history of *ancien régime* France and the more recent sociopolitical events of the Second Empire.<sup>35</sup> From a young age she interacted with exiled members of the French royal family including the Comte de Chambord, and the French sculptress Mademoiselle Félicie de Fauveau; and she read the letters of Madame de Sevigné, and books such as *Histoire des ducs de Bourgogne* by Prosper de Barante (1826) and J. C. L. Sismondi's *Histoire des français* (1839). Two adjacent chapters in her *Leaves from the Note-Books* are of particular note: one charts the rise and fall of Napoleon I and the other deals with the history of the Bourbons (pp. 51–72). Lady Dorothy also appears to have demonstrated Bonapartist sympathies. Notably, her father owned 'a very fine bust of the Emperor by Canova' and as a family they travelled to sites associated with the French Revolution (*Leaves*, p. 52). Throughout her life she knew Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie personally, as well as Princess Mathilde and Prince Demidoff. One could argue that her relationship with Eugénie may have further encouraged her admiration of *ancien régime* France.<sup>36</sup> Following the Franco-Prussian War Lady Dorothy visited Paris and 'collected a few relics of that dreadful struggle' and later she visited Sedan, the site of Napoleon III's capture (*Leaves*, p. 164). Every year she made the same trip to France, visiting the Conciergerie on the Île de la Cité in Paris to view Marie Antoinette's cell, and then taking a trip to Versailles. There she remarked that Marie Antoinette remained an almost 'living figure to the visitor of any imagination' (*Leaves*, p. 101). She even collected several pieces of porcelain with purported Marie Antoinette provenance, including a Sèvres biscuit group, at the time thought to depict the queen with her children (*Fig. 5*).

In light of these visits, the highly specialized collection of Sèvres porcelain she assembled can be understood as an extension of her engagement with an intellectual rhetoric of French history, culture, and politics. In fact, Lady Dorothy collected a systematic array of 'old' Sèvres porcelain, starting with early pieces of Vincennes in the rococo style, through to later neoclassical examples.<sup>37</sup> With its decorative vocabulary rooted in nature, Vincennes porcelain, dating from the 1740s until the manufactory relocated

<sup>35</sup> See for example, Tom Stammers's work on the link between amateur historians and collectors, in 'The Bric-a-Brac of the Old Regime: Collecting and Cultural History in Post-Revolutionary France', *French History*, 22 (2008), 295–315 (p. 309).

<sup>36</sup> *Reminiscences*, pp. 55–56. The cult for *ancien régime* France during the Second Empire has been dealt with in much greater detail than can be afforded here. See Tom Stammers, *The Purchase of the Past: Collecting Culture in Post-Revolutionary Paris c. 1790–1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Alison McQueen, *Empress Eugénie and the Arts: Politics and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 269–318.

<sup>37</sup> For a detailed introduction to the Royal Sèvres Manufactory, see Svend Eriksen and Geoffrey de Bellaigue, *Sèvres Porcelain: Vincennes and Sèvres 1740–1800* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).



Fig. 5: Josse François-Joseph Le Riche, *Le Déjeuner*, c. 1775, Sèvres biscuit porcelain, *Connoisseur* 2 (1902), p. 154.

to Sèvres in 1756, may have appealed to her interest in botany and the natural world (Fig. 6). During this time it was very difficult for collectors and dealers to distinguish between Vincennes and Sèvres porcelain. Very early Vincennes pieces are normally unmarked, or only marked with interlaced 'L's'. As such, the ability to correctly identify Vincennes relied solely on a haptic and visual knowledge of the translucency and soft feel of the early paste, and an ability to recognize the naturalistic colour palette. This level of classification was quite advanced for the time, and as there was a lack of literature on the subject, it is likely that Lady Dorothy developed an educated eye which surpassed that of contemporary collectors. By 1861 she was even featured as a well-known ceramics collector in Eugène Piot's *Le Cabinet de l'amateur*.<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, in England it was her husband Reginald who received public recognition as the owner of this ceramics collection. In both the first

<sup>38</sup> Eugène Piot, *Le Cabinet de l'amateur: années 1861 et 1862* (Paris: Librairie Firmin-Didot frères, 1863), p. 306.



Fig. 6: Photograph showing some of the soft-paste Sèvres porcelain owned by Lady Dorothy, *Connoisseur*, 2 (1902), p. 153.

and second edition of *Collections Towards a History of Pottery and Porcelain* (1850, 1857) by Joseph Marryat, it is Reginald who is listed as a collector, rather than Lady Dorothy.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, in February 1862, after an early planning meeting at the South Kensington Museum for the Special Loans Exhibition, the committee listed her husband ‘Neville, R., esq- Sèvres Porcelain’ as a collector ‘from whom it may be desirable to request loans’.<sup>40</sup> The omission of Lady Dorothy from this request and from contemporary scholarship highlights a wider problem for the visibility of women collectors during this period. Needless to say, temporary exhibitions depended on the generosity of lenders. Such exhibitions also provided collectors with a public platform whereby the quality and significance of their objects could receive positive affirmation. Scheduled to take place during the summer of 1862 to coincide with the visitor numbers generated by the International Exhibition, the ‘Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Mediaeval, Renaissance, and More Recent Periods’ was organized by John Charles Robinson, the superintendent of the art collections. Section Nine of the exhibition was completely dedicated to Sèvres porcelain. It included 282 items lent by a select number of collectors, including Queen Victoria, the Duke of Buccleuch, and Lord Crewe.<sup>41</sup> As Ann Eatwell has suggested, ‘the

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Marryat, *Collections Towards a History of Pottery and Porcelain* (London: Murray, 1850), p. 367; 2nd edn (1857), p. 438.

<sup>40</sup> Special Loans Committee Meeting, February 1862, South Kensington Museum Files, London, V&A Museum (V&A), Archive of Art and Design.

<sup>41</sup> J. C. Robinson, ‘Section Nine’, in *Catalogue of the Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Mediaeval, Renaissance, and More Recent Periods, on Loan at the South Kensington Museum in 1862*, ed. by J. C. Robinson, rev. edn (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1863), pp. 114–38.

lenders themselves were almost as important to the Museum as their objects in terms of prestige.<sup>42</sup> Paul Greenhalgh has also written that Victorian exhibitions were hailed as charitable occasions, as he argues that ‘philanthropy, one of the human spin-offs of the industrial system, found its place on exhibition sites’.<sup>43</sup> Collectors who loaned objects were therefore undoubtedly influenced by various motivations, including the moral values associated with Victorian philanthropy, ideas of self-glorification, and perhaps also a belief that the economic value of their objects could potentially increase.<sup>44</sup>

So where does Lady Dorothy fit within this? By the time the Special Loans Exhibition opened in the new South Court in June 1862 and the exhibition catalogue was published, Lady Dorothy was listed finally as the true owner of her collection, having loaned twenty pieces of Vincennes and Sèvres porcelain. It is difficult to fully comprehend why the exhibition committee suddenly gave Lady Dorothy this recognition. Whatever the case, she must have seen this as an opportunity to legitimize herself and claim ownership of her collection, while simultaneously removing herself firmly from the scandals of her past. She must have been particularly vindicated that her objects were displayed alongside the queen’s collection. Her unique collection was highlighted in the press: notably, the *Illustrated Times* discussed the ‘rare pieces from the collections of the Duke of Buccleuch, Lady Dorothy Neville, Mr R Napier’.<sup>45</sup> The colourful displays were also celebrated by the *London Daily News*, which reported that ‘the Sèvres china is one of the great features of the Exhibition; it is an array of gorgeous beauty of colour and luxury of fantastic form [...]; the pieces lent by Lady Dorothy Neville [...] are particularly rare.’<sup>46</sup>

As these exhibition loans involved a form of temporary ‘gift exchange’, it is important to consider the reciprocal interactions at play.<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, participation in this loan exhibition bolstered Lady Dorothy’s position as a more visible and highly celebrated collector within the enlarged public sphere of the Victorian art world. However, it also confirmed that she could now emulate male norms of collecting and exercise her agency by interacting directly with the museum through the donation of artworks.

<sup>42</sup> Ann Eatwell, ‘Borrowing from Collectors: The Role of the Loan in the Formation of the Victoria and Albert Museum and its Collection (1852–1932)’, *Decorative Arts Society*, 24 (2000), 21–29 (p. 24).

<sup>43</sup> Paul Greenhalgh, *Fair World: A History of World’s Fairs and Expositions from London to Shanghai 1851–2010* (Windsor: Papadakis, 2011), p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> G. R. Searle, *Morality and the Market in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 180.

<sup>45</sup> *Illustrated Times*, 14 June 1862, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> *London Daily News*, 5 June 1862, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> As Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos has noted in relation to philanthropy and gift exchange, such exchanges always take place ‘in a context of reciprocal interactions’. See Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, ‘Gifts and Favors: Informal Support in Early Modern England’, *Journal of Modern History*, 72 (2000), 295–338 (p. 299).

Furthermore, through its inclusion in the public sphere of the exhibition space, her collection also had the potential to contribute towards the wider knowledge and dissemination of ceramics connoisseurship. For example, Section Nine, which was catalogued by both Robinson and the ceramics connoisseur William Chaffers, offered a thorough history of the Sèvres manufactory through its chronological display, of which her Vincennes pieces counted as some of the earliest examples. Only a few years later Chaffers included some of Lady Dorothy's Sèvres as exemplar pieces in his 1866 *Marks and Monograms on Pottery and Porcelain*.<sup>48</sup> Finally, by the third edition of Marryat's *History of Pottery and Porcelain* published in 1868, Lady Dorothy was definitively listed as a distinguished ceramics collector instead of her husband.<sup>49</sup> As one of the few women collectors listed, this must have confirmed her increasing status as a legitimate and well-established art collector and connoisseur. (By contrast, it is worth noting, for example, that Lady Schreiber was never included in such scholarship.)

Having succeeded in securing public recognition for her Sèvres collection, Lady Dorothy continued to position herself beyond the traditional domestic sphere of the home. Nonetheless, she remained somewhat constrained by her gender. For example, as a woman she was unable to become a member of specialized societies such as the Collector's Club, founded by Robinson in 1856, and later known as the Fine Arts Club; nor could she join the Burlington Fine Arts Club founded in 1866.<sup>50</sup> Her husband, whom Lady Dorothy dismissed as merely a 'collector in a small way', became a member of the Fine Arts Club in May 1863.<sup>51</sup> Although reliant on Reginald for access, it was thanks to his membership that Lady Dorothy could attend meetings, form connections with prominent collectors, and bring her objects in for observation. It was not uncommon for over a hundred guests to be invited to gatherings of the club (Eatwell, 'Private Pleasure', p. 132). Access to such events must have further established Lady Dorothy's position within the wider social and connoisseurial networks of the London art world. By 1873 she was one of only three women invited to contribute ceramics to the Burlington Fine Arts Club's exhibition on European porcelain (*Fig. 7*).<sup>52</sup> It is of interest to note that Lady Schreiber was not included

<sup>48</sup> W. Chaffers, *Marks and Monograms on Pottery and Porcelain* (London: Davy, 1866), pp. 531, 532.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Marryat, *Collections Towards a History of Pottery and Porcelain*, 3rd edn (London: Murray, 1868), p. 522.

<sup>50</sup> Rules of the [...] Club and list of members, April 1857–May 1860; April 1866. V&A, National Art Library special collections, Fine Arts Club File. See also, Stacey J. Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions and the Shaping of Art History in London: The Burlington Fine Arts Club* (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2017), pp. 3–5.

<sup>51</sup> Fine Arts Club: Candidates Proposal Book, 1857 April–1872 June. V&A, National Art Library special collections, Fine Arts Club File.

<sup>52</sup> The other two women lenders were Mrs John Ashley and a Miss Palmer.



Fig. 7: Photograph showing a display at the 1873 European porcelain exhibition, Burlington Fine Arts Club, as seen in *A Short Description of the English and Continental Porcelain Exhibited June 1873* (London: Spottiswoode, 1873).

in the exhibition, although her husband did participate. Once again, this could suggest that contemporaries held Lady Dorothy and her collection in greater esteem than other women collectors who have since overshadowed her in the historiography of this period.

#### **‘Matronage’ and museum loans**

Against this background, let us now turn our attention to how Lady Dorothy operated as a cultural philanthropist within the Victorian art world that she had managed to situate herself within. Before we examine her continued role in loan exhibitions it is important to recognize that Lady Dorothy’s philanthropic tendencies can also be viewed through her support and patronage of contemporary artists, particularly women. An avid collector of paintings, she assembled an impressive collection of eighteenth-century French genre paintings, owning peasant scenes by Jean-Baptiste Chardin (1699–1779), work after Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805), and pastels by Rosalba Carriera (1675–1757) and Jean-Baptiste Perronneau (1715–1783).<sup>53</sup> Lady Dorothy collected several pastels by Carriera, including one depicting Horace Walpole, which was later displayed in her drawing room at Charles Street (*Fig. 8*). Carriera was a widely celebrated artist; born in Venice, she later moved to France where she painted Louis XV as a child and entered the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture.<sup>54</sup>

This is a notable instance of Lady Dorothy collecting work by a woman artist, perhaps suggesting an admiration for Carriera who overcame the restraints of her gender and gained notability in the eighteenth-century

<sup>53</sup> In fact, her *Girl with a Kitten*, c. 1743 by Perronneau, now hangs in the National Gallery, London, presented by Sir Joseph Duveen in 1921 (NG3588).

<sup>54</sup> Katharine Baetjer and Marjorie Shelley, *Pastel Portraits: Images of 18th-Century Europe* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), p. 8.





Fig. 8: Lady Dorothy's drawing room in Charles Street, London, in Nevill, *Exotic Groves*, Plate 13.

art world. Although Lady Dorothy patronized some contemporary artists, including James Abbott McNeill Whistler, G. F. Watts, and Sir Edward Burne-Jones, she was a particularly strong advocate for women artists, notably Eliza Redgrave (c. 1804–?) and Kate Greenaway (1846–1901). Redgrave, the overshadowed sister of the painter Richard Redgrave and art critic Samuel Redgrave, was a great watercolour artist. She worked first as Lady Dorothy's governess. Redgrave certainly exposed her protégé to the early Victorian art world; she would often 'escort [Dorothy and her sister] to exhibitions' introducing them to up-and-coming artists.<sup>55</sup> In fact, in later years Lady Dorothy expressed her keen admiration for such an

<sup>55</sup> Guy Nevill, *Exotic Groves: A Portrait of Lady Dorothy Nevill* (London: Russell, 1984), p. 34.

inspiring woman, describing Redgrave as ‘a woman of great cultivation, besides being possessed of a certain distinction of mind [...]’. For thus was implanted in my mind a love of the artistic’ (*Reminiscences*, p. 249). As Sharon Marcus suggests, friendship among women during the Victorian era gave them a certain kind of agency.<sup>56</sup> Female friendship offered not only social connections but also the possibility of cultural, artistic, and intellectual exchange.

Although Lady Dorothy hosted political salons with large groups that were significantly more male-dominated, she did seek out more intimate friendships with like-minded women. On one occasion after taking tea together, Lady Schreiber and Lady Dorothy visited the British Museum to consult with Augustus Franks (1826–1897) to determine the function of a ceramic butter mould.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Lady Dorothy actively bought picture books and watercolours by Kate Greenaway, offering her unwavering friendship and financial support. Such a determination to support and unite women together through her collecting practices and cultural philanthropy reveals a feminist strategy or form of ‘matronage’ that has never before been considered in relation to Lady Dorothy. This is further reinforced by her participation in the 1894 ‘Fair Women’ summer exhibition hosted by the Grafton Galleries. Organized by the Ladies’ Committee of the Grafton Galleries, this exhibition was devoted entirely to beautiful and powerful women.<sup>58</sup> Lady Dorothy, probably seeing this as an extension of her philanthropy and belief in the equality of women, loaned twenty-seven objects including miniatures, snuffboxes, and French and English porcelain.<sup>59</sup>

Building on the recognition which the Special Loans Exhibition had bestowed on her, throughout her life Lady Dorothy used temporary loan exhibitions to assert her position within the Victorian art world. In 1865 she contributed seventeen items to the ‘Special Exhibition of Portrait Miniatures’ held at the South Kensington Museum and often loaned pieces of her antique glass collection. Of course, exhibition loans always came with a certain amount of risk, and on one occasion while lending a two-handled engraved glass goblet she noted that ‘it got cracked in transit — a warning for the future’ (*Under Five Reigns*, p. 297). In 1878 she was one of the contributors to a ‘Special Loan Exhibition of Furniture’ at Bethnal

<sup>56</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Lady Charlotte Schreiber’s Journals: Confidences of a Collector*, ed. by Montague J. Guest, 2 vols (London: John Lane, 1911), II, 479–80.

<sup>58</sup> For more information about the significance of this exhibition, see Meaghan Clarke, *Fashionability, Exhibition Culture and Gender Politics: Fair Women* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> Catalogue of the ‘Fair Women’ summer exhibition 1894, London, Grafton Galleries.

Green Museum.<sup>60</sup> This museum in East London, a branch of the South Kensington Museum, served to educate one of the poorest areas of the city with temporary exhibitions. A few years earlier, in 1872, a reported 700,000 people had visited the collection of the philanthropist Richard Wallace, with one newspaper reporting that the visitors were ‘chiefly, of course, the inhabitants of this wretched suburb’.<sup>61</sup> Lady Dorothy also sought to donate to museums outside London, including Nottingham and Sheffield. In 1878 she contributed several pieces to the ‘Industrial Art’ exhibition held by the Midlands Counties Museum in Nottingham, including an eighteenth-century silver toilet service, a travelling tea service, and wrought ironwork. Contemporaries praised the ironwork which was thought to be ‘of more direct interest to the people of Nottingham’.<sup>62</sup>

Undoubtedly, Lady Dorothy’s most significant contribution to museums during the late Victorian era was the long-term loan bequest of her celebrated ironwork collection, first to the Weston Park Museum in Sheffield in 1888, and then to the South Kensington Museum in 1892. Through the act of salvaging and lending these ironworks, Lady Dorothy succeeded in emphasizing their cultural value. As we have already discussed, she clearly identified herself as an antiquarian who collected objects of historical and cultural importance, often in a very systematic and archaeological manner. This was true for her collection of old Sussex ironwork which she acknowledged was fairly encyclopedic and ‘includes some very good specimens – fire-dogs and backs, rush-light holders, tongs, and the like – of this extinct industry’ (*Leaves*, p. 152). As Terri Baker has noted, Lady Dorothy’s donation of ironwork reflects a rising importance for collecting objects that ‘belonged to a vanishing part of British history’ (p. 179). Perhaps this was also linked to a sense of patriotic duty and a responsibility to collect objects of national heritage. She mourned that ‘much that was picturesque and curious has disappeared; few old customs survive’ (*Leaves*, p. 145).

Yet it would be limiting to consider her collection and subsequent donation of ironwork simply as a manifestation of nostalgia or sentimental souvenir collecting. Instead, I argue that Lady Dorothy sits within an intellectual and historicized collecting paradigm. As Susan Crane and Kate Hill have observed, in the late nineteenth century, the rhetoric of antiquarianism reformed itself into a more systematic discipline of archaeology.<sup>63</sup> Lady Dorothy, encouraged by her role in the Sussex Archaeological Society, developed not only an aesthetic but a technical interest in the subject, in

<sup>60</sup> *East London Observer*, 11 May 1878, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 19 October 1872, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Notes on Industrial Art at the Midland Counties Museum, Nottingham’, *Magazine of Art*, 1 (1878), 154–58 (p. 157).

<sup>63</sup> Susan A. Crane, ‘Story, History and the Passionate Collector’, in *Producing the Past: Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice 1700–1850*, ed. by Martin Myrone and Lucy Pelz (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 187–203 (p. 191); and Hill, p. 91.

particular studying the ins and outs of the historical Sussex iron trade.<sup>64</sup> According to Deborah Cohen, the growing Victorian interest in collecting antiques ‘signified the triumph of substance over mere style’.<sup>65</sup> By gaining such a significant understanding of this specific genre of local vernacular production, Lady Dorothy valorized the labour and craftsmanship that went into creating these objects. As she developed extensive knowledge on the subject she was often called upon for her opinion by other collectors. Namely, a Mr Arthur Marriott once wrote requesting her judgement and permission to send a picture of some of his pieces of Sussex ironwork, including a rushstick ‘found in the Tenant’s Room in the Bohun Tower at Cowdray’ (*Life & Letters*, p. 96).

During this time a growing literature supporting the importance of ironwork emerged, and Lady Dorothy’s role as a key authority contributed to this discourse. Over the years several of her pieces appeared in *Archaeologia*, and in 1886 an article titled ‘Extinct Sussex Art’ featured in the *Art Journal*, which borrowed substantially from her collection.<sup>66</sup> It referenced Lady Dorothy as an authority on the subject and included her connoisseurial judgement about the original functions and dates of objects, as well as some key illustrations of the more unique pieces (*Fig. 9*). That same year another article appeared in the *Portfolio* which celebrated the aesthetic significance of her collection, noting that the pieces ‘are modelled with great skill and artistic feeling’.<sup>67</sup> Such articles must have further reinforced her position as a collector, and also bestowed a certain sense of legitimacy and value to the educational potential of her collection. This may have inspired Lady Dorothy to donate her collection on a more permanent basis to a museum to further its scholarly potential and to showcase it as a valuable surviving example of Britain’s historical craft production.

Lady Dorothy chose first of all to donate her ironwork to a regional museum, Weston Park in Sheffield. Sheffield was already a city singled out by Ruskin and the Guild of St George as a place where art could be used to educate the poor and working classes in the city, or perhaps even revive forgotten crafts.<sup>68</sup> According to Lady Dorothy, Sussex villages and the objects

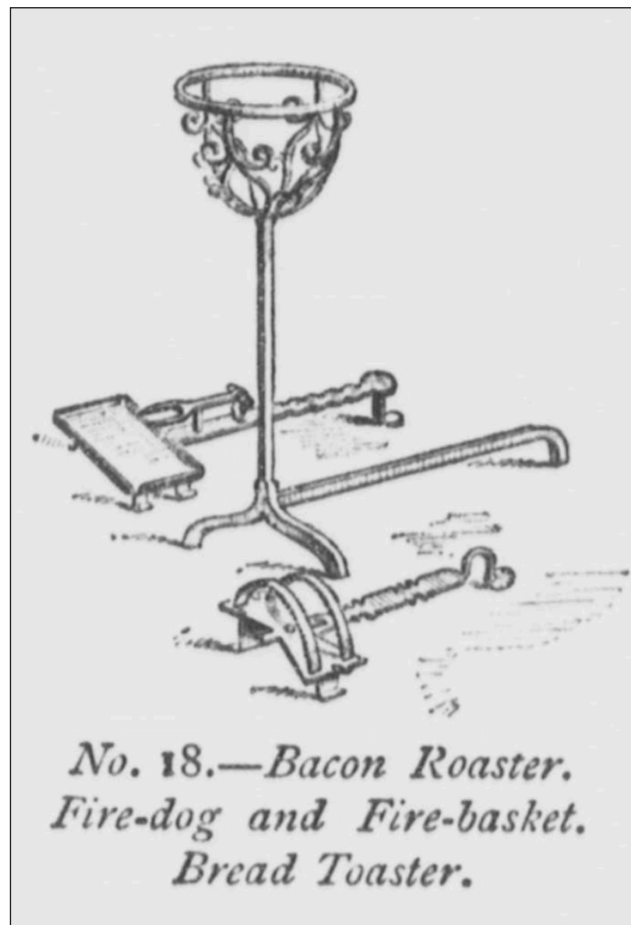
<sup>64</sup> On one occasion a local wrote to her stating ‘I will see if I have any more about the Sussex iron trade amongst my MSS. If I have your Ladyship shall have it’ (*Life & Letters*, p. 97).

<sup>65</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 147.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, J. Starkie Gardner, ‘Iron Casting in the Weald’, *Archaeologia*, 56 (1898), 133–64 (p. 144); J. T. Balcomb, ‘An Extinct Sussex Art: Notes and Sketches in Eastern Sussex, II’, *Art Journal*, December 1886, pp. 372–75.

<sup>67</sup> Reginald T. Blomfield, ‘Sussex Ironwork of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries’, *Portfolio*, January 1886, pp. 169–73 (p. 172).

<sup>68</sup> Christopher Long, ‘Introduction: Ruskin’s Two Paths and the Arts and Crafts Movement’, in *The Rise of Everyday Design: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain and America*, ed. by Monica Penick and Christopher Long (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 1–34 (p. 3).



*Fig. 9:* Ironwork from the collection of Lady Dorothy Nevill. Illustration from J. T. Balcomb, 'An Extinct Sussex Art', *Art Journal*, December 1886, pp. 372–75 (p. 373).

they contained 'retained so much of old-world quaintness and charm' (*Leaves*, p. 281). This acute sense of loss for the past ultimately led her to act to save the future through a Ruskinian means of salvage and social reform. For example, Ruskin emphasized the importance of pre-industrial craft design for aesthetic reform as it displayed 'authentic modes of craft production' (Hill, p. 183). Lady Dorothy was actually known for designing wrought iron objects, demonstrating her dedication to supporting and reviving this almost extinct craft.<sup>69</sup> The idea that she learned to work with iron herself could also be read as an expression of her embodied interest in

<sup>69</sup> Charles G. Harper, 'Door Knockers: Ancient Examples and Modern Instances', *Architecture*, 1 (1896), 302–05 (p. 303).

the material. Furthermore, it subverts the gender norms associated with the iron industry and its legacy. During this period ironworks would have been considered primarily as objects found within a ‘male’ collecting rhetoric. Ironwork appealed to collectors such as J. C. Robinson, Henry Willett esq., Guy Francis Laking, and George Salting. All of these men loaned pieces to the celebrated Burlington Fine Arts Club ironwork exhibition in 1900. Nonetheless, some women also supported the production and subsequent collection of British ironworks. These included Lady Schreiber, whose first husband Sir John Josiah Guest was the owner of the Dowlais Ironworks in South Wales. She once wrote, ‘since I married I have taken up such pursuits as in this country of business and iron-making would render me conversant with what occupied the male part of the population.’<sup>70</sup> As Dianne Sachko Macleod has remarked, Lady Charlotte embraced the technical processes of ironworks and on one occasion acknowledged that she used the iron industry to subvert gender norms.<sup>71</sup> With this in mind, it is possible to speculate that Lady Dorothy too subverted traditional gender boundaries by collecting ironwork and learning how to work iron herself. This enabled her to develop a discreet knowledge of its trade, craftsmanship, and cultural value. As a benefactor of objects that were typically perceived as ‘male’, one could therefore argue that these loans enabled Lady Dorothy to remake gender identities within the public sphere of the late Victorian museum.

In 1888 Lady Dorothy made a bequest to Weston Park of at least seventy-six objects. This was well received, with the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* praising her generosity and observing that ‘these are genuine examples of old smith’s work, and will, no doubt, prove interesting and attractive’ as studies of pre-industrial art and design.<sup>72</sup> Although this loan remained in Sheffield for four years, by 1892 Lady Dorothy had turned her attention towards establishing a longer-term loan of her ironwork at the South Kensington Museum. She was especially keen to educate the urban population of London, stating on one occasion that

what is really wanted is a London Museum somewhat on the lines of the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, which contains such priceless and interesting relics, prints, and pictures of the city from its earliest days. A museum of this kind exercises an educational influence of the very best kind.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Revel Guest and Angela V. John, *Lady Charlotte: A Biography of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), pp. 19–20.

<sup>71</sup> Dianne Sachko Macleod, ‘Art Collecting as Play: Lady Charlotte Schreiber (1812–1895)’, *Visual Resources*, 27 (2011), 18–31 (p. 19).

<sup>72</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 30 April 1888, p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> *Under Five Reigns*, p. 285. For a broader discussion of the need for a ‘London Carnavalet’, see Jordanna Bailkin, *The Culture of Property: The Crisis of Liberalism in Modern Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 183.

With this in mind it becomes clear that Lady Dorothy viewed the South Kensington Museum and its didactic agenda as the closest equivalent in England which could achieve such ‘educational influence’. Certainly, she had been a dedicated supporter of the museum from its earliest beginnings, as she noted: ‘I have been a follower, I may say, of the fortunes of the collections at South Kensington from the very beginning, having been present at some of the early meetings when the first idea of the museum was mooted.’ On another occasion she also stated that ‘of all the museums [...] the one I like the best of all is the Victoria and Albert Museum at South Kensington’ (*Reminiscences*, pp. 219–20, 253). Lady Dorothy may have also been encouraged to make a bequest by her fellow collectors and friends, including John Jones and Lady Schreiber, both of whom she praised for their much larger donations to the museum (*Reminiscences*, p. 252). On 24 February 1892 Lady Dorothy made the first donation of ‘70 iron objects’ which were accepted by the museum. In particular the loan was supported by Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke, who had just been appointed keeper of the art collections. Clarke offered his support to Lady Dorothy’s philanthropic gesture stating that ‘I believe the collection will be of great interest and fill up an important gap in our iron-work’.<sup>74</sup>

It is evident that from the beginning of this process Lady Dorothy intended to remove her objects from Sheffield. On 11 March 1892 the seventy-six pieces that had originally been placed in Weston Park were added to the South Kensington Museum on loan (BHA, MA/1/N342). The Sheffield museum was disappointed to lose her patronage. Writing in early March 1892, its curator, Professor Elijah Howarth, told Clarke that ‘I should have thought the collection hardly suitable for exhibition in your museum, but rather of more interest in a manufacturing town’ (BHA, MA/1/N342). Nevertheless, her loan was received well by contemporaries in London, and by June 1892 the gallery at South Kensington underwent a redisplay to accommodate her pieces. After the reopening one newspaper commented that ‘among the new objects is an interesting series of domestic implements used in England during the eighteenth century [...] collected and lent by Lady Dorothy Nevill’.<sup>75</sup>

Over the following years Lady Dorothy continued to enhance her loan bequest, and by 6 October 1894 she had added 158 objects of iron-work in total. In June 1899 she arranged for more ironworks, including two historical iron firebacks, to enter the collection, yet this time she arranged their purchase on behalf of the museum. After a recommendation from Lady Dorothy, Clarke, who was now the director of the South Kensington Museum, asked her ‘to negotiate for the purchase of these two [fire] backs,

<sup>74</sup> Lady Dorothy Nevill, Nominal File, V&A, Blythe House Archives (BHA), MA/1/N342.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Notes on Art and Archaeology’, *Academy*, 11 June 1892, p. 574.

and to save them for us'. Clarke's use of the verb 'negotiate' bestowed power onto Lady Dorothy as she competed for these firebacks, securing the objects from a farm in Sussex. In the end she succeeded in buying an iron fireback 'with Royal Arms and ER' and another with 'two male figures upholding a coat of arms'.<sup>76</sup> Upon receiving the news, Clarke congratulated Lady Dorothy on securing a 'most favourable price' and in his letter of recommendation to the museum he acknowledged that 'the largest, bearing the arms of Edward VI, being worth much more [...] I strongly recommend this purchase' (BHA, MA/1/N342). The archives also suggest that this may not have been the first time Lady Dorothy orchestrated such a transaction, as in March 1892 she had travelled to Guildford to bargain with a Mr G. Oliver, a 'Dealer in Antiquities' based at 98 High Street, Guildford, who later forwarded firebacks on her behalf to the museum. The intention here is not to suggest that Lady Dorothy became an agent of sorts, but it does indicate that her role as a collector and museum benefactress is more complicated than at first glance. As such she should not be seen merely as a passive female museum lender, but instead viewed as an active benefactor determined to assert control and ultimately grow her donated collection. This confirms her agency as she sought to fill museological gaps and succeeded in recommending and negotiating new acquisitions.

Over the coming years Lady Dorothy continued to play a part in the public dissemination of her ironwork collection. In 1900 several pieces were featured in the Burlington Fine Arts Club 'Exhibition of Chased and Embossed Steel and Iron Work of European Origin', and in April of that same year some of her collection was exhibited at the 'Hammersmith Industrial Exhibition'. Writing in April 1900, Clarke instructed the objects to be 'delivered on Monday next', stating that 'Lady Nevill's authority is attached' (BHA, MA/1/N342). Lady Dorothy still retained authority over her collection, which must have given her a continued sense of control and involvement in its display both within the museum and further afield. In 1902 pieces were donated to the 'Exhibition of Sussex Iron Work' held at the Sussex Archaeological Society and finally, in 1904 to an exhibition in Chichester.<sup>77</sup>

After her death in 1913 the majority of Lady Dorothy's art collection was dispersed by her descendants at two posthumous auctions at Christie's.<sup>78</sup> Her ironworks remained on display in the South Kensington Museum until 1914. Although there is a lack of archival documentation,

<sup>76</sup> June 1899, BHA, MA/1/N342.

<sup>77</sup> Sussex Archaeological Society, Brighton, East Sussex Record Office, ACC 9048/3/1/3; BHA, MA/1/N342.

<sup>78</sup> *Catalogue of Decorative Furniture, Porcelain and Objects of Art and Vertu, Property of Lady Dorothy Nevill*, 1 July 1913, Christie, Manson & Woods; and *Catalogue of Porcelain: Being the Remaining Portion of the Collection of the Late Lady Dorothy Nevill*, 22 July 1924, Christie, Manson & Woods.



it appears that upon her death Lady Dorothy had intended for her collection to remain on view within the museum. However, complications with her estate soon disrupted the loan agreement and it was concluded that the ironwork ‘cannot be presented under the will’.<sup>79</sup> As such her loan bequest could no longer remain in the museum. Lady Dorothy’s legacy was essentially erased. In the end the museum was only able to purchase twelve objects from her original list of 158 loans, and the rest were returned to the family.<sup>80</sup> Today, the majority of these pieces remain in storage and Lady Dorothy has been overlooked in the institutional memory of the museum.

### A lifelong collector

Acquiring walnut busts of Michelangelo and Raphael on her first grand tour at the age of ten, and delighting in the purchase of a silver opera ticket owned by her ‘kinsman’ Horace Walpole shortly before her death, Lady Dorothy Nevill dedicated her life to collecting. At one stage she noted that it ‘is of necessity a slow process’. She believed that true collecting ‘forms and refines the taste, where mere buying on the advice of others is what anyone, can do’ (‘My Collection’, p. 151). This article has shed new light on her rather forgotten yet complicated character: an art collector and antiquarian who felt the acute loss of Britain’s pre-industrial past, she was also dedicated to science, botany, and sought moral and legal equality for women. She succeeded in overcoming her scandalous youth by carving out a significant position within the wider social, political, and cultural circles of Victorian England. Undoubtedly, Lady Dorothy’s role as a cultural philanthropist enabled her to exert influence beyond the traditional parameters of the female domestic sphere by participating in loan exhibitions, contributing to emerging scholarship, and later embracing her role as a museum benefactress. Her exhibition and museum loans brought public recognition, and they may have also acted as a form of self-glorification; yet more importantly, they complemented her broader lifelong commitment to cultural education.

In many ways these acts of cultural philanthropy can be viewed as an extension of her collecting practices. Often passed over for the more feted figure of Lady Schreiber, Lady Dorothy has been unfairly painted as an eccentric and frivolous collector of ‘rubbish’ unworthy of critical scholarly attention. Conversely, this article has demonstrated that Lady Dorothy undoubtedly received greater acclaim from her contemporaries than Schreiber as an esteemed collector of ceramics and other decorative arts. Yet, following her death and the subsequent dispersal of her collection,

<sup>79</sup> 25 July 1913, BHA, MA/1/N342.

<sup>80</sup> Purchases made in May 1914. BHA, MA/1/N342.

her legacy as a woman collector and benefactor has faded from cultural consciousness and institutional memory. Her example suggests a deeper and more systematic problem with the way in which the history of women collectors has been written. However, a greater scrutiny of this lesser-known Victorian woman collector on a more individual level has made it possible to reclaim her significance. As Tom Stammers rightly argues in the introduction to this issue of *19*, there has been an absence in scholarship regarding the role of married women as autonomous economic actors and collectors. I would also argue that women, especially those who collected alone and not alongside their husbands, are also deserving of even greater attention and scrutiny. By placing a stronger emphasis on Lady Dorothy's individuality, it is possible to reconsider the interplay between Victorian women who functioned as both art collectors and cultural philanthropists and the agency which this duality afforded them. Living under five reigns of the British monarchy, Lady Dorothy's vivacity for history, pursuit of knowledge, and dedication to cultural education continued to drive her collecting practices, and by extension her philanthropic endeavours. By positioning Lady Dorothy within a wider historiographical framework of art collecting and cultural philanthropy during this time, it is evident that her contribution to the enlarged sphere of the Victorian art world should no longer go unnoticed.