

# Joseph Mayer of Liverpool

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JOSEPH MAYER was well known to London archaeologists in Victorian times. When public museums were rare, and the British Museum was generally unwilling to buy items of British archaeology, however important, Mayer was often the only one who was willing and able to step in.

Mayer, a manufacturing jeweller, lived modestly in order to collect. He established his museum in Liverpool in 1852. Inspired by the B.M.'s Egyptian gallery, it was based on Egyptian antiquities and beach-combed finds from Meols. Important items were available and relatively cheap, especially on the continent which Mayer visited regularly. Within a few years, Mayer had added the Faussett collection of Anglo-Saxon antiquities, the Fejérváry ivories and prehistoric metalwork, and everything from Persian manuscripts to Staffordshire pottery. His most grandiose purchase was of the Hertz Collection of classical sculpture, engraved gems and cameos.

In 1867, Mayer gave his museum to Liverpool. It instantly became Britain's most important public museum after the British and South Kensington Museums. Unfortunately, it has since experienced two calamities. Parts of the collection, including most of the ceramics, were destroyed in 1941 during an air raid. The collection had already suffered because Mayer's will permitted the posthumous dispersal of his papers, which included the bulk of the documentation. This disaster affects London archaeologists because among them were the bulk of Roach Smith's notes on Roman and medieval London, which are still missing.

This attractively-presented volume<sup>1</sup> reviews Mayer's collection as it exists at Liverpool Museum or can be reconstructed. Two general essays about his life and his patronage of the arts and scholarship are followed by discussions on each collecting area by nineteen specialists.

The contributors take various lines of approach. This stems from the miscellaneous nature of Mayer's collection, but the result is rather uneven. It might have been better if the material had been arranged in

three sections, the biography being followed by essays on Mayer as a collector, with a final section for descriptions of important individual pieces.

In general, those essays which concentrate on Mayer's collecting activities are the most valuable, especially those on British archaeology, Egyptology, gems, arms and armour, and pottery. Mayer's Wedgwood and Oriental ceramics are (or rather *were*) important because he knew something about the subject. His outstanding archaeological collections were acquired because he took advice from abler minds, notably Roach Smith. Otherwise, Mayer collected largely on the basis of decorative appeal, hoping to stimulate his visitors' interest and imagination. It is therefore disappointing that the visual impact of certain items could not be conveyed through colour photographs rather than black and white.

Given the difficulties of compiling a volume about one with such diverse interests, it is no surprise to find omissions. There is no general assessment of Mayer's position in the history of collecting. He was clearly an unusual figure, but seems to have influenced certain minor collectors, for example Joseph Clarke, the founder of Saffron Walden Museum.

Two important areas of his collection are also excluded. For reasons beyond editorial control, a chapter on Mayer's ethnographic collections failed to appear, and there is no chapter on the contemporary autograph letters. This is understandable, since apart from the late A. N. L. Mumby, it is hard to suggest anyone qualified to write it. Nevertheless, the importance of Mayer's autograph letters should have been mentioned, as should Mumby's book on the subject<sup>2</sup>. This not only discusses the background to collections such as Mayer's, but describes Mayer's contacts with the London collector William Upcott, large portions of whose collections he later purchased.

This volume is nevertheless to be welcomed as a significant contribution to the history of museums and collecting in Britain and as a first step towards publishing Liverpool's collections. It is a worthy tribute to Joseph Mayer on the centenary of his death.

£18, paperback only.

A. N. L. Mumby *The Cult of the Autograph Letter in England* (London 1962).

1. Margaret Gibson and Susan M. Wright (eds.) *Joseph Mayer of Liverpool 1803-1886* Soc. Antiqs. of London Occ. Paper (New Ser.) 11, 1988. Published in association with the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside. 244 pp., 4 illus., 66 pl.