

A Study on the Harriet Mallon Basket

Daniel William Roberts

Harriet Mallon Basket

Maker: John Bridge, for Rundell Bridge and Rundell

Date: 1827

Location: London

Material: Silver



Harriet Mallon Basket

John Bridge

London

1827

Diameter 42cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

Description: Of circular form with wickerwork sides heavily ornamented with cast fruiting vines. The centre of the body is engraved with a fitch of bacon and an inscription. The pail handle is cast with fruiting vines and the initials "H SA" surmounted by a ducal coronet for Harriet Duchess of St Albans nee Mellon (1777-1837).

The permanent collection at Liang Yi Museum in Hong Kong is largely a craft-focused collection consisting of four main areas of interest: classical Chinese furniture, European vanities, Japanese objects d'art and an exceptional collection of European and American domestic silver.

This magnificent basket comes with a fascinating association with one of the most celebrated actresses of the late 18th century. Harriet Mellon was born in November 1777 to a wardrobe mistress of a travelling theatre group. It is unclear who her father was, her mother alluded to a Lt. Matthew Mellon, from whom she got her surname, reputedly in The Madras Army. She started performing on the stage when she was about nine years old and appeared to do very well. During her teenage years, she became acquainted with a family of bankers called the Wrights, who remained lifelong friends. In 1795 their son John introduced her to Richard Brinsley Sheridan who was co-manager of Drury Lane at the time. He was clearly very impressed with Harriet and recruited her for Drury Lane and also Liverpool's Theatre Royal.



Harriot (Mellon), Duchess of St Albans, by Sir William Beechey (died 1839).

Around this time, she befriended two of the most celebrated actresses of their day, Sarah Siddon and Dorothea Jorden, who were to have an enormous influence on her life. They both coached in acting and she observed how differently they were treated by the public- particularly in caricatures. In particular Sarah Siddon had, through some very careful PR, managed to maintain a sense of uprightness, a feat of genius for an actress who was regularly lampooned in the press at the time. From then on Harriet always sought to curate her public persona.

Harriet was particularly well-paid for her performances and she shrewdly invested much of it with the Wrights' bank. By 1801, aged 24, she was able to buy a mansion, Holly Lodge near Highgate, which she cherished for the rest of her life.

In 1810 she met Thomas Coutts, banker to George III, while staying in Cheltenham. Over the course of a few days, he fell in love with her and when they returned to London, he sought her out at Drury Lane and latterly frequently visited her at her rooms on Russell Street. Unfortunately, Thomas was married and had three daughters. In 1815 Thomas's wife passed after a long illness. Soon afterwards Thomas, now aged 80 and Harriet, aged 38, were secretly married by special licence to avoid the wrath of Thomas's daughters. On Thomas's advice, the marriage contract stipulated that Harriet was to keep control of all of her own funds and property. Harriet bought each of the three daughters a substantial house from her own funds in an attempt to make them feel at ease with her. She spent a lot of time with her step-grandchildren whom she came to adore and installed a nursery at Holly Lodge, their main residence. There they entertained lavishly and were visited by the Prince of Wales and the Dukes of York, Kent and Clarence among others.

They were happily married for 7 years before Thomas died in 1822. Harriet nursed him attentively through his last illness. It is easy to look at this relationship and think it a marriage of convenience, but according to their surviving correspondence, they were devoted to each other. After his death, for the rest of her life, she travelled with a box of his letters which she frequently read through. Thomas left Harriet a vast fortune including his 50% stake in Coutts. Harriet took her role at the bank seriously; it is thought she was coached by Thomas in the event of his death to bring to fruition his plans for the bank's future. She regularly scrutinised the books and exercised her right to vote at partnership meetings.

Sometime after Thomas' death, she was introduced to William Beauclerk, 9th Duke of St Albans by her lifelong friend Sir Walter Scott. In 1827, after nearly five years of courtship, Harriet, now aged 50, and William, aged 26, married. In reply to a letter of

congratulations from Sir Walter Scott she wrote that she and the duke were “old and true friends”. She went on to say;

“What a strange eventful life has mine been, from a poor little player child, with just food and clothes to cover me, dependent on a very precarious profession, without talent or a friend in the world – first the wife of the best, the most perfect being that ever breathed ...and now the wife of a Duke! You must write my life... my true history written by the author of Waverley”.



Portrait of Sir Walter Scott by Sir Thomas Lawrence (1826)

On their first wedding anniversary, Harriet and William held a lunch party at Holly Lodge, attended by the Royal Dukes of Cumberland and Sussex and Prince Leopold, the future King of Belgium. During the celebrations, the Duke noted an ancient custom held in the village of Little Dunmow in Essex, by which if a couple swore that they had not regretted their first year of marriage and withstood cross-examination, they would be presented with a flitch of bacon. As it was not within his power to revive the custom, he begged her to accept a silver fruit basket engraved with a flitch of bacon and an inscription. This is the very basket pictured. The inscription reads:

*“In love connubial formed to live and Last,
This gift records a blissful twelve months past*

*We claim then boldly claim thy flitch Dunmow
First of the blest who keep they marriage vow!
June 10th, 1828'*

In her marriage contract, Harriet retained control over her fortune as she intended to leave the Coutts inheritance to one of Thomas's grandchildren. Harriet and the Duke lived between Holly Lodge and Brighton where the Duke indulged himself in horse racing.

Harriet died in 1837 aged 59 and was buried in the St Albans family crypt. She had always been determined to keep the bank in the Coutts family. She left her fortune to Angela Burdette, the oldest of the 10 grandchildren. Angela was her favourite grandchild, having spent a lot of time with her when she was a child at Holly Lodge. Harriet instilled in her sense of philanthropic duty and she eventually became widely known as a generous benefactor. Angela spent most of her vast income on a wide range of projects and donations.

In her will Harriet made some stipulations including that Angela had to adopt the name Coutts, she was only to have access to the income and not the capital and finally, she was forbidden from marrying a foreigner. One of Angela's cousins had married a niece of Napoleon and Harriet was concerned that the bank might end up in French hands. In 1881, Angela, now aged 67, married her 29-year-old American-born secretary, William Bartlett, and had to forfeit three-fifths of her income to her sisters. Angela died in 1906 after which William carried on many of her philanthropic projects.

It is unclear who inherited this basket from Angela but we do know it was sold at Christie's in 1914 at a sale titled 'The Coutts Heirlooms; originally the property of Harriet Mellon Duchess of St Albans' It was purchased by 'Hannam', undoubtedly a member for the famous goldsmithing family, for approximately £63 which is roughly now the equivalent of £3,700 today.

The basket passed into the collection of Walter Samuel, 2nd Viscount Bearsted. It was eventually sold at Sotheby's in October 2020 where it was acquired by Liang Yi Museum.