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The Lady Lever Art Gallery Port Sunlight, The Legacy of the King of Soap

I visited the Lady Lever Art Gallery in August last year and it was a really memorable experience and it was like no other that I had ever been to. The art gallery was an expression of its collector, William Hesketh Lever (who became the first Viscount Leverhulme), but its setting was part of a grand vision that only one of the great Victorians could have imagined.

Before looking at the Gallery and its collections, it is important to give some historical context about its founder and how this all came about.

William Lever was born in Bolton in 1851 and was the son of a wholesale grocer. The family were Congregationalists and the nonconformist ethos of self discipline and entrepreneurship was profoundly influential on his life and career. 1.

Lever left school at 16 and joined the family business to which it was immediately apparent that he had great aptitude. After rapidly expanding the business, he decided in 1884 to specialise in one product - soap.

This was a shrewd decision as the use of soap had gained great popularity in Britain in the 19th century. The average British person in 1801 used around 3.6 lb of soap per year, which shot up to 8 lb in 1861 and more than doubled by the end of the century. 2.

Lever was not so much interested in the technical aspects of how soap was made, but he was the first to recognise the possibilities of selling it in individual packets with a brand name - *Sunlight*. Business expanded rapidly and by 1888 Lever sought out a site to build a new factory on a much larger scale. (Fig 2.) A greenfield site was found in the Wirral on the banks of the Mersey River, (Fig 4) which he named it after his brand of soap - Port Sunlight.



Fig 1. Lady Lever Art Gallery, taken from the garden sundial in the avenue.



Fig 2. The Victorian front entrance to the Unilever factory at Port Sunlight.



Fig 3. Rows of workers houses in Tudor and Queen Anne style opposite the factory entrance.

2.

The 52 acre area of vacant marsh land that he purchased allowed him ample room for a large factory. However, Lever was to create a village surrounding this with houses for his workers, which he helped design in various architectural styles. (Fig 3.)

Lever leased these properties to his workers at a discounted rate and each house incorporated a front and back garden, in which he hoped that they would come to know more about the science of life and learn that there was more to enjoy in life than merely going to and from work and looking forward to Saturday night to draw their wages. 3.

This was quite revolutionary thinking for the time and he was also to provide sporting facilities such as tennis courts, football and cricket pitches, as well as arts and science societies (philharmonic, amateur dramatic and horticultural amongst others). The village was also quite self sufficient with shops and a post office.

This generous and enlightened view that Lever adopted was also very smart economically, as he realised that a happy and fulfilled worker was also much more productive and loyal. This laid the foundation for the business to thrive nationally and ultimately internationally. Having a local railway station and being located on the banks of the Mersey was also key to this expansion.

With the increasing success of the business William Lever developed an interest in collecting art in the 1880s and started to buy pictures at the annual Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

He started collecting more seriously in the 1890s after the purchase of Thornton Manor, a large estate around 4 miles south west of Port Sunlight. He also came under the influence of the collector and part-time dealer James Orrock (1829-1913), who collected British pictures, 18th century English furniture and Chinese porcelain.

Lever was in the habit of buying whole collections, especially where these were slightly outside of his area of knowledge and he bought Orrock's collection on three separate occasions in 1904, 1910 and 1912.

Lever had exhibited some of his collection from 1902 at Port Sunlight, but it wasn't until he purchased some large Victorian pictures from the George McCulloch Collection in 1913 that he realised that a purpose built gallery was needed. His wife Elizabeth passed away that year and he was to name the gallery after her.

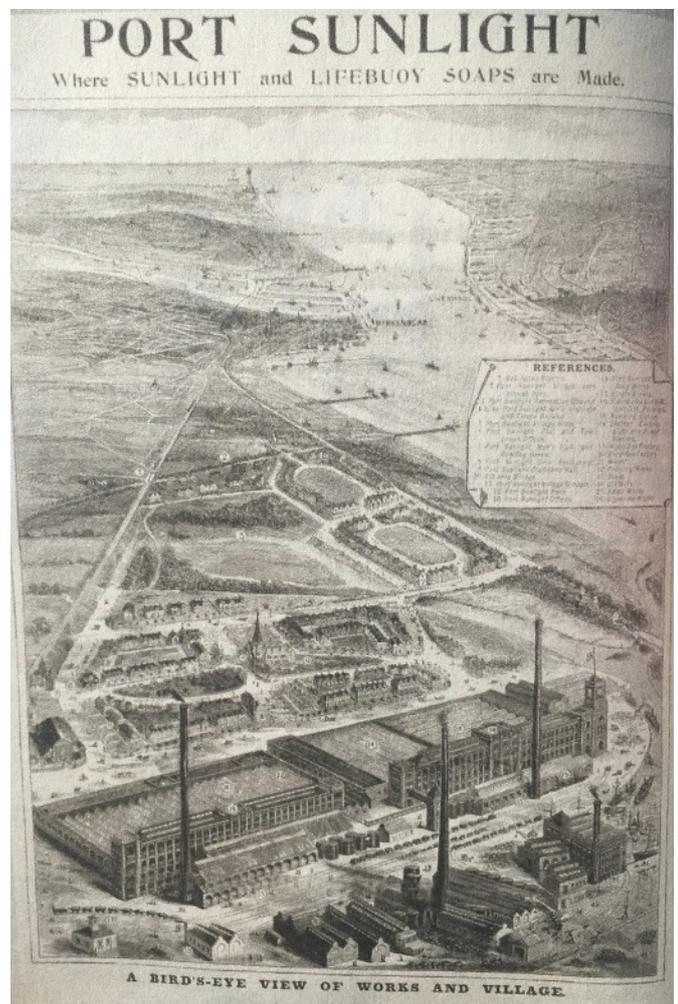


Fig 4. Illustrated London News illustration of an aerial view of Port Sunlight, December 1898.

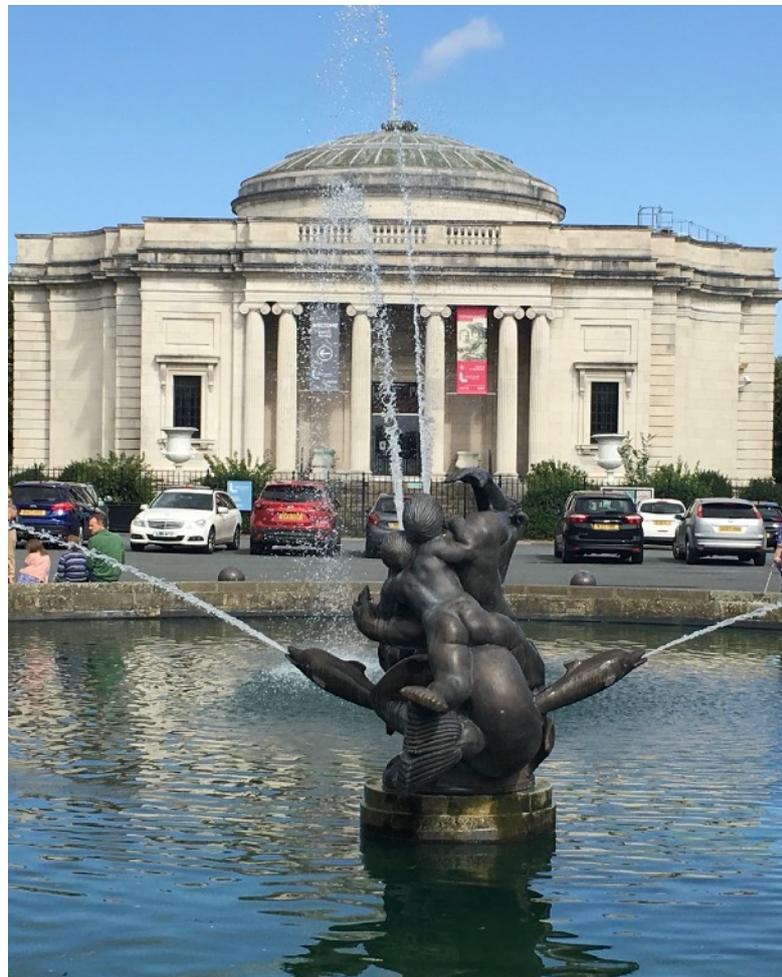


Fig 5. View of the Lady Lever Art Gallery from the fountain, *Sea Spirit*, by Sir Charles Wheeler, 1950.

3.

The gallery was officially opened in 1922 by Queen Victoria's youngest daughter, Princess Beatrice. Lever's pattern of buying now changed in that he began to acquire pictures and objects for specific display in the Gallery. He was also concerned with making his collection more representative, with key works from different periods. With regard to paintings, he felt that the Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite works with a greater focus on narrative subjects would be more popular, which has proved to be the case up until today. 4. (Figs 6. and 29.)

This was also the case with the Chinese collection, as Lever's personal collection had focused mainly on porcelain, especially the blue and white and famille verte of the Kangxi period, which was in fashion at this time in Britain and the US. One of the displays featuring a garniture of five blue and white Kangxi vases (Fig 7.) uses a photographic backdrop of the display as it had existed at Thornton Manor prior to the establishment of the Gallery. Virtually all the pieces in the image are of the Kangxi period.

Lever himself was to buy some jade and cloisonné pieces to widen the collection and after his death, the trustees of the Gallery were to buy some ceramics from the Han, Tang and Song dynasties.

There are two galleries dedicated to Chinese ceramics and works of art, which were refurbished in 2016 as part of a £1.2m Heritage Lottery grant. As with many contemporary displays, a thematic approach is taken, covering subjects like death and the afterlife, Confucianism, Buddhism and worshipping the gods. (Fig 8.)



Fig 6. The main hall at the Lady Lever Art Gallery.



Fig 7. The photographic backdrop illustrates the display at Thornton Manor.



Fig 8. The first Chinese gallery.

4.

The first gallery one enters has a display of mainly ceramics and cloisonné, the ceramics having a strong sculptural emphasis. (Fig 8.)

One of the most significant works in this space is the inscribed Ming lead-glaze stoneware figure of Guanyin, dated to 1484. (Fig 9.) The figure sits in a pose of contemplation with his legs crossed in *dhyanasana* with his hands resting in his lap in the meditative *dhyanamudra*. The figure is completed with downcast eyes, which lend it a quiet and peaceful repose.

The inscription states that this figure was a gift from a man named Dang and his wife Chong. It belongs to a group of four figures from the same unknown northern temple, which are all similarly inscribed and with the maker's name Liu Zhen.

One of the most significant porcelain sculptures in the gallery is the large pair of imperial Qianlong period famille rose altar elephants. Each animal is ornately decorated with body jewellery in bright colours and has a cloisonné vase of jade leaves and coral berries, that sits on an elaborate saddle and cloth. Each are over 70cm long and would have been a challenge to fire in the kiln. These were purchased by Lever in 1920.



Fig 9. The stoneware figure of Guanyin dated to 1484, 140cm high.



Fig 10. A large pair of famille rose altar elephants, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period, 70.6cm long



Fig 10. A pair of large famille rose figures of Lu Xing and Shou Xing, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period.

Two other large scale famille rose figures on display are the Daoist figures of Lu Xing (representing status or rank) and Shou Xing (long life). These are two of the three Star gods or *Sanxing*. The missing figure from the group is Fu Xing, the god of prosperity. The term *Sanxing* is commonly used to describe three attributes of a good life and are commonly displayed on the side of temples and in homes in China.

The robes of the two figures are highly ornate and are painted in bright colours with elaborate brocade decoration. These would have most likely been for prominent display in the home of a courtier. Interestingly, there are holes above and below the mouth on each figure, where hair would have been attached.

The heads and the hands of these two figures would most likely have been fired separately and later attached.

Two of the most interesting pieces of cloisonné enamel in the gallery are the incense burners from the Qianlong period. (Figs 11 and 12.) They are both quite different in form, but the quality of the workmanship is of the finest quality. The larger example is quite unusual in that it has elephant head feet, handles and a recumbent beast on the top of the cover.

The smaller double gourd censer is unusual for its double gourd form, its dark blue enamel ground and the two gilt-bronze lions clambering up the side of the body. Each has a ribbon in its mouth which is attached to a brocade ball, which forms the base for the over strung handle.

The interrelationship between the gilt-bronze elements, which are generally cast separately and attached to the body, and the brightly coloured enamel decoration, create an overall rich and sumptuous effect that would have appealed to the Qianlong emperor.



Fig. 11. A large cloisonné enamel censer, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period.



Fig 12. A cloisonné enamel double gourd censer, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period.

6.

Moving into the second gallery, 18th century ceramics predominate under the themes of feeding the family, wine and beer drinking, writing skills, everyday luxury and a matter of taste.

The major highlight from the writing skills section is the white brush washer in the form of an alms bowl. (Fig 13.) Lever obtained a number of jades and cloisonné pieces from Sir Trevor Lawrence (1831-1913), when he bought his entire collection. It is carved in high relief with bats flying amongst a dense ground of cloud scrolls and the colour of the stone is of a really consistent white colour.

The other highlight from this section is the large Kangxi period famille verte brushpot depicting scholars conversing on a grassy bank of a river, whilst a boy leans over a bridge with a stick. (Fig 14.)

An unusual exhibit in this gallery is the two Kangxi period famille noire blackamoor figures. (Fig 15.) Blackamoor figures are believed to have originated in Italy in the 17th century and became popular in various media in Europe in the 18th century. These are very rare in Chinese porcelain. Lever purchased the female figure standing on a leaf from the Sydney E. Kennedy sale in 1916.

Another unusual and rare exhibit in this gallery is the Qianlong period reverse-decorated blue ground double-gourd vase and cover. (Fig 16.) Instead of painting the blue decoration on a white ground, spaces are left in white for the gourds and leafy tendrils and the details are then filled in, in blue. In Chinese art, the double-gourd represents fertility by virtue of its many seeds.

The recent refurbishment of the galleries are successful in that their thematic approach to the displays gives a logical framework to the exhibits and are thus quite accessible to visitors who are new to the field. The clear, well lit cabinets with pieces at various heights also make viewing easy.



Fig 13. A white jade alms bowl, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period.



Fig 14. A famille verte brushpot, Qing dynasty, Kangxi Period.



Fig 15. Two famille noire blackamoor figures, Qing dynasty, Kangxi period, the left figure, 41.5cm high.



Fig. 15. The second Chinese gallery.



Fig 16. A reverse decorated blue ground double-gourd vase, Qing dynasty, Qianlong Period, 31.8cm high.

7.

Towards the centre of the building, off the main hall, there is a larger gallery that gives an insight into William Lever as a collector and this gallery exhibits a number of pieces of Kangxi porcelain, 18th century jade and cloisonné. The blue and white garniture display in front of the large photographic backdrop of Thornton Manor is in this space. (Fig 7.)

Lever oversaw the purchase of every piece in his collection and was as meticulous in this as he was in his business dealings. He also had good advisors, who were also his dealers, that is Joseph Duveen, Edward Gorer and his successor Frank Partridge. 5.

Two highlights from this gallery are the imperial Yongzheng mark and period reverse-decorated powder-blue ground 'Gardenia' dish (Fig 20.) and the Qianlong period large carved spinach-green jade flattened circular vase and cover, standing on a gilt-bronze stand, elaborately decorated with foliage and *ruyi* feet. (Fig 21.)

When walking through all the different galleries of the Lady Lever Gallery, it does certainly strike you what a remarkable man William Hesketh Lever was and what a legacy he left behind. He was certainly an unconventional and quite eccentric man and he believed that to be successful, there could be no gain without pain. He certainly lived this ideal and slept in an open air bed, (Fig 19.) where it was not uncommon for him to awake in winter covered in snow. He would habitually rise at 4.30am every morning to an ice cold bath and would have conducted hours of business before any of his employees arrived at work.

However he was a well loved and respected employer and embodied the vision and energy of one of the great Victorians.



Fig 17. The entrance to the gallery - 'Lever the Collector'.



Fig 18. Exhibits in the gallery - 'Lever the Collector'.



Fig 19. Outdoor bedroom at Thornton Manor.



Fig 20. A reverse-decorated powder-blue 'Gardenia' dish, Yongzheng mark and period.



Fig 21. A spinach-green jade flattened circular vase and cover, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period, with matching gilt-bronze stand.



Fig 22. A Georgian mahogany breakfront bookcase displaying cloisonné and painted enamel pieces.

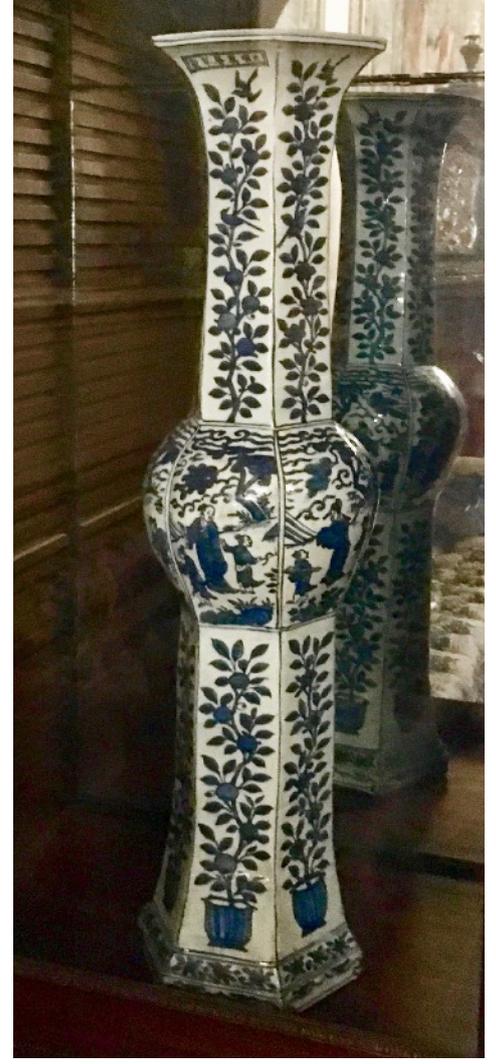


Fig 23. A very large blue and white gu vase of hexagonal section, Wanli mark and period.



Fig 24. A pair of large famille rose figures, Qing dynasty Qianlong period, a pair of famille vert Long Eliza vases, Qing dynasty, Kangxi period and a famille verte Water Margin dish, Qing dynasty, Kangxi period.



Fig 25. Famille verte, famille noire and blue and white vases, Qing dynasty, Kangxi period.



Fig. 26. Display of part of the Wedgwood collection.



Fig 27 Portrait of William Hesketh Lever, 1st Viscount Leverhulme, by William Luke Fildes (1843-1927).



Fig 28. Portrait of Lady Elizabeth Lever by William Luke Fildes (1843-1927).

Notes

1. National Museums Liverpool, *Lady Lever Art Gallery*, 2013, p. 7.
2. Macqueen, Adam, *The King of Sunlight, How William Lever Cleaned up the World*, London 2004, p. 28.
3. *Ibid*, p. 58.
4. *Op cit* National Museums Liverpool, p. 12.
5. Davids, Roy, Jellinek, Dominic, *Provenance, Collectors, Dealers & Scholars: Chinese Ceramics in Britain & America*, 2011, p. 291.

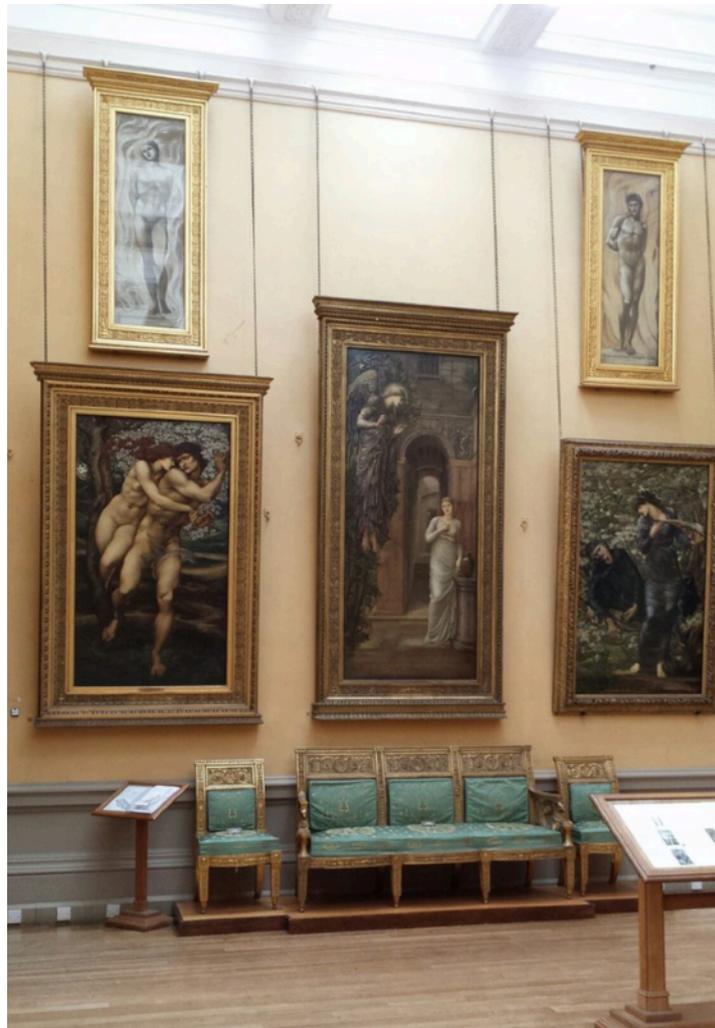


Fig 29. Some of the Victorian narrative paintings in the main hall.

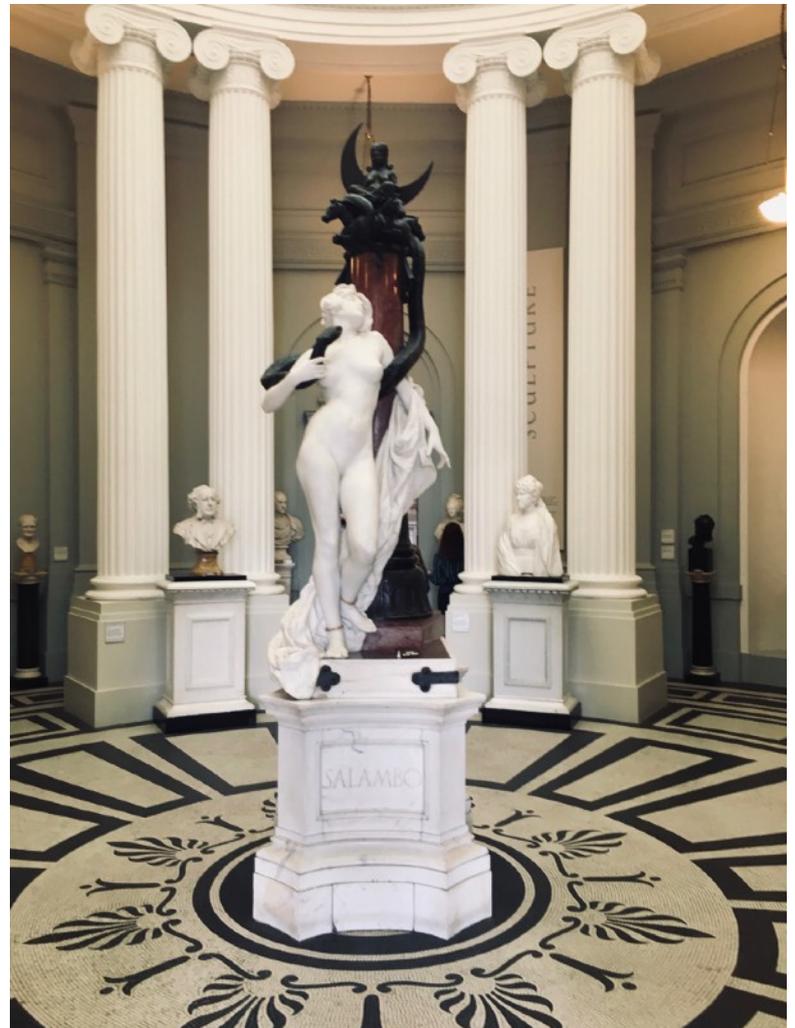


Fig 30. The 18th and 19th century sculpture gallery.