

# What a life!

Review of three biographies:

Michael Baggott: *As Found, A Lifetime in Antiques, 2024*

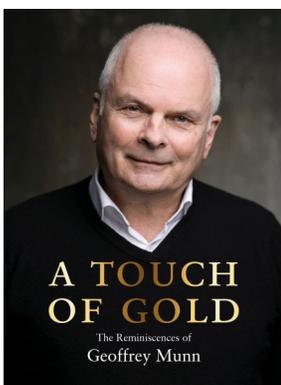
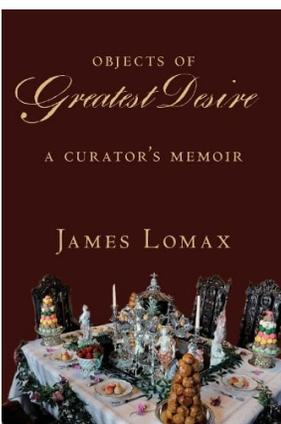
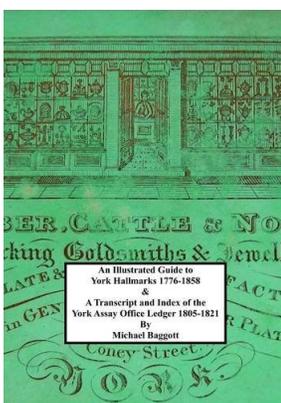
James Lomax: *Objects of Greatest Desire, A curator's memoir*

Anthony Eyre, Mount Orleans Press 2025

Geoffrey Munn: *A Touch of Gold, The Reminiscences of G.M.*

ACC Art Books, 2025

By Dorothea Burstyn



These books are a must-read for all antiques lovers and collectors, after all Geoffrey Munn' and Michael Baggott's appearances on the Antique Road Show, BBC's Flog it, Instagram and YouTube made them household names. Additionally, I have fond memories of the Wentworth Castle Conference which was organized and led with great charm and wit by James Lomax. Reading these biographies promised to learn more of what makes these men "tick".

Munn and Lomax come from solid middle class, while Baggott grew up in a poor Birmingham neighbourhood. None of their families were particularly interested in paintings or decorative arts. Still a child Baggott fell in love with silver coming across an antique silver stand during a visit to the Stoke on Trent Garden Festival. His mother supported this interest by driving him to country auctions, his sacrifices for collecting started early by skipping school lunches to save up for small purchases.

Geoffrey Munn's entering the world of antiques was accidental. It was his wish to move to London that he answered an advertisement looking for an assistant in a jewelry shop. He got an interview with the owner of the prestigious antique jewelry shop Cameo Corner. After his positive answer to the question if he was ambitious, he lost his chance working

there but was referred to Wartski. After a successful interview with Kenneth Snowman, he got the job and spent his entire career at this establishment.

James Lomax always loved the arts, traveled often to Italy, his best friend called him a frustrated art historian. Some soul-searching made him quit his well-paid London job. After three years of studying and working low-paying jobs he landed a two-year curatorial traineeship at Temple Newsam in Leeds.

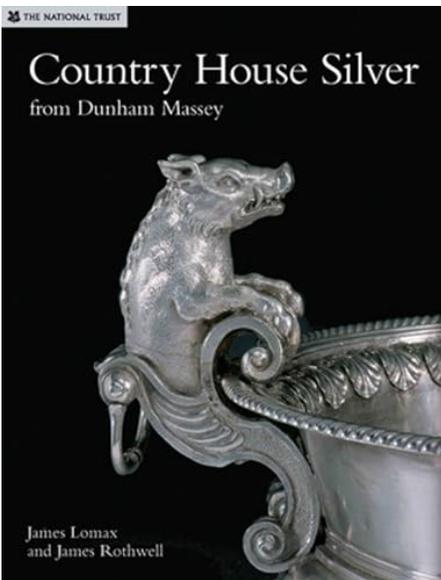
A steep learning curve and some misery awaited all three, but they found their way in good time. Michael Baggott watched and rewatched all recorded episodes of the Antique Road show and spent most of his money on books. All this studying paid off and brought him first a summer intern job at Christie's and later a job at Sotheby's. But he soon found out that jobs at auction houses are low-paying drudgeries and went back to trading independently. James Lomax start at Temple Newsam was brilliant with curating a very successful exhibition of John Singer Sargent. Not only did he manage to get many important loans, but the idea to hang the paintings in various rooms of Lotherton Hall made it a total hit. Despite this his contract at Leeds was not renewed and he had to wait several years before he was called back to Temple Newsam. Retailing is not easy and led in the beginning to some embarrassing moments for Geoffrey Munn, as for example when he asked the King of Greece to introduce himself while showing him Wartski's Fabergé collection. But he soon learned correct form and terms of address, after all Wartski was a shop which did not only attract royal customers but also many celebrities from all walks of life.

Michael Baggott's clients stay mostly unnamed, but Geoffrey Munn offers many amusing stories of famous clients. Frank Sinatra, whose visits to Wartski were announced like royalty, Mrs. Rosenberg/Joan Rivers whose stage personality stayed always "bottled" up as she had very refined manners in real life, Bing Crosby whose purchases were stolen immediately in his hotel but found by Munn in an odd antique store years later, and then of course the very substantial collectors of Fabergé like Harry Woolf and Malcolm Forbes. The most bizarre of his clients was superrich, rude and for decades bedridden with a mysterious sickness Ann Hull Grundy. Munn had to travel to her home in Hampshire and visit her in her bedroom to show her interesting jewelry pieces. She in fact assembled a very fine collection of antique jewelry which she later donated to many museums, the lion share going to the Fitzwilliam and the British Museum. James Lomax did not have to put up with difficult clients, but crisis came when Evelyn Silber was appointed as new director of Leeds Museums and Galleries. Not only did she voice her opinion that everybody who was in the same job for more than ten years was probably useless and not ambitious, but she also forced all employees to re-apply for



their old jobs. Calling Lomax' scholarly silver catalogue of Temple Newsam and Lotherton Hall mere 'navel gazing' and 'elitist' did not endear her further.

Only the Cascoigne family silver including many race cups were original to Temple Newsam, the rest of the silver had been purchased during Robert Rowe's directorship. The real impetus to write and publish a catalogue of the silver came with the arrival of the Kirkleatham centerpiece, a prime example of Huguenot silver work made in 1731 by David Willaume and his sister Anne Tanqueray. A forerunner to the epergne it was very versatile as by exchanging various components it could be used for either lunch or dinner. Its arms of Yorkshire MP Cholmley Turner of Kirkleatham made it an ideal addition to the museum. After the Blenheim tureen and several important Victorian pieces were added to the collection, James Lomax had his "showstoppers" and work began in earnest. The catalogue *British Silver at Temple Newsam and Lotherton Hall* so pleased Belinda Cousens, the National Trust Historic Building Rep, that she asked James Lomax to work on a similar catalogue of George Booth, Lord Warrington's important silver collection at Dunham Massey.

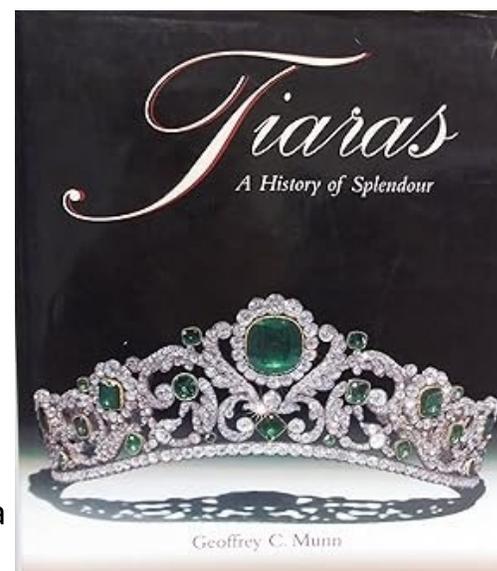
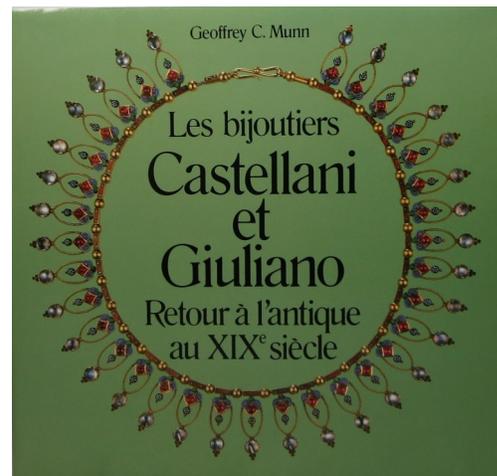


James Lomax worked on this on and off for about 10 years until *Country House Silver from Dunham Massey* was finally published in 2006. By that time Belinda had retired, but her successor James Rothwell was a willing co-author who contributed the story how the Warrington silver had been distributed in the 1920s.



Kirkleatham centerpiece

Geoffrey Munn's interest in Carlo Giuliano was triggered when Bill Little, grandson to Giuliano's brother Frederico, offered to buy all the Giuliano pieces Wartski had in stock. Years of research followed, much material was unearthed by finding the family of Giuliano's chief designer P. Novissimo and a further research trip to Rome resulted in his book *Castellani and Giuliano – Revivalist Jewellers of the Nineteenth Century* in 1984. As Giuliano was favored by Queen Victoria, much Giuliano jewelry was found in royal collections. Queen Elizabeth II enamelled gold necklace is pictured in the book and Princess Margaret's fringe moonstone and ruby necklace is featured on the front cover. High Society also played a major part in Munn's next publication. Wartski held a lot of jewelry of famous clients for safe keeping. Geoffrey Mann was especially intrigued by the various tiaras held in Wartski's safe. A stunning tiara set with 44 large deep green emeralds and 1031 brilliant diamonds which had been made for the daughter of Queen Marie Antoinette Princess Marie Thérèse, was then owned by Viscountess Lambton (currently in the Galerie d'Apollon in the Musée du Louvre). Munn organized a show held at Wartski called *One Hundred Tiaras – An Evolution of Style 1800 – 1900* displaying many important tiaras from royal and aristocratic houses. To lighten things up, Munn asked Dame Edna Everage to contribute a piece of her/his collection. Witty as always Dame Edna replied that all her tiaras had been stolen in the Ladies Room of Sydney Opera House, uninsured they could not be replaced. Not discouraged Munn had a special fake tiara made for her. Another touch were Elton John's tiaras bought from some "crap bridal shop in Los Angeles". The show had been such a wonderful success and so much research had gone into the various exhibits that Munn published his book *Tiaras- A History of Splendour* in 2001.



Not supported by colleagues and well-meaning bosses nor having the security of a salary Michael Baggott's book *An Illustrated Guide to York Hallmarks 1776-1858, A Transcript and Index of the York Assay Office Ledger 1805 to 1821* is a true labor of love. He lived months on end like a hermit only pausing for the occasional meal writing his book on York silver, thus sharing his extensive knowledge about the subject. Starting with photographing the 176-page ledger at the York Assay Office and transcribing it, he then photographed many silver pieces and their marks. Not having the money to use a commercial printer he even made the book's layout and title page and had 100 copies printed. (Sadly, Michael Baggott passed away January 2025 only 51 years old from a heart attack. His extensive collection contains 500 pieces of York silver; the first part of 150 lots was sold at Woolley & Wallis in June 2025 bringing twice the estimate.)

What collector or dealer does not speak proudly about their trouvailles. No difference here! Always on the hunt of unusual silver items, Michael Baggott once sold his car to purchase a rare Irish sugar bowl and cream jug. Great was his pleasure when he found a Henry VIII seal top spoon, marked for 1544, the first year the assay included the lion passant mark. And equally great his regret when he sold this spoon with a profit but before the prices of early spoons really took off. His story how he bought two urn-shaped "white metal" wine labels inscribed with "Golden Cordial" is wild. He detected these in a lot of 40 run of the mill wine labels in an American auction. Inquiring the auctioneer would not take a bid coming from the UK. Finding "Golden Cordial" missing from the official list of wine label inscriptions, he next searched for a recipe of this drink to learn that it was popular in 18<sup>th</sup> century Southern States of America. Disappointed but not beaten, intuition made him look on eBay. He typed "Golden Cordial" as search on eBay persistently and found these rare American wine labels offered months after the original auction there. His winning bid was \$ 65.00 – a far cry from the \$ 3000.00 he had entered as his maximum.

Geoffrey Munn was an equally diligent researcher; one lucky day he found a hawthorn-shaped cross in a jewelry store in Burlington Arcade. He soon could ascertain that it was one of the Whiteland Crosses commissioned by John Ruskin and designed by the famous painter Burne-Jones. Sometimes earlier Munn had asked Charlotte Gere, the author of *Victorian Jewellery Design* to co-author a book on Pre-Raphaelite jewels. Thinking this challenge impossible to fulfill, she agreed on the condition that he found a Whiteland Cross. Now the happy outcome was their book *Artists Jewellery: Pre-Raphaelite to Arts and Crafts*, which has been reprinted many times.

One can only be in awe of the fundraising skills of Geoffrey Munn and James Lomax. Geoffrey Munn's preferred charity was the Samaritans, a charity founded by Dr. Chad Varah in 1953 which had grown into 200 branches with 20000 volunteers. Its main purpose was the prevention of suicide by relying entirely on the telephone. Inspired by the many previous successful exhibitions of Fabergé, Munn staged his own Fabergé exhibition at Wartski. As the House of Windsor has the largest Fabergé collection he could rely on many royal contributions. But the real coup came when Prince Rainier of Monaco agreed to lend the Serpent Egg Clock. It is part of the famous Imperial Easter Eggs and had been sold by Wartski to Stavros Niarchos in 1972, who apparently forgot to mention this provenance when selling it on. The exhibition was a total success making £ 25000.00 for the Samaritans. Even more successful was Munn's next idea of having an auction selling events with famous people. To name only two examples: a tour of the House of Lords by Baroness Thatcher fetched £ 10000.00 and to have formally a rose named after a loved one brought £ 13000.00, all in all this event added nearly £ 100.000.00 to the Samaritans coffers. Munn even ran the Marathon, training diligently for the event, and finishing 56, he had been sponsored to the tune of £ 80.000.00. Next to these spectacular successes he helped many other charities by giving talks, his favorite subjects of course tiaras and Fabergé.



Epergne, Thomas Phipps, London 1759

Thomas Phipps in 1759 and looking like a Chinese garden pavilion plus coming from the estate of Daisy Fellowes, the sewing machine heiress and editor of Vogue, made his heartbeat faster.

When director Christopher Gilbert raised £750000.00 to secure the Kirkleatham centerpiece for Temple Newsam, James Lomax took note and states that he learned a lot about fundraising. His two most important projects came after he took early retirement in 2010. Ever since Temple Newsam had borrowed a chinoiserie epergne for the *Chinese Whispers* exhibition, he wanted one for Temple Newsam. The epergne he

found at a Masterpiece Fair had all the bells and whistles. Made by



Lord Raby's wine cistern, Phillip Rollos, London  
1705

Many successful application to art funds followed until the epergne arrived at Temple Newsam. To celebrate the event Lomax arranged a small exhibition of an 18<sup>th</sup> century dessert table with the epergne as stunning centerpiece.

Lomax' second major triumph was to secure Lord Raby's giant wine cooler for the nation. The second largest wine cooler in England, weighing 2500 ounces, it was made for Lord Raby as part of his ambassadorial plate for Berlin by Philip Rollos in 1705. It had been sold by Sotheby to a Chinese oligarch for the world record price of £ 2.5M. An export permit had been applied for, in the opinion of many museum's experts the wine cooler should be going to Yorkshire, after all Wentworth Castle had been Lord Raby's seat. Fundraising was not made any easier as this sale had come shortly after the Fellowes epergne purchase, but James Lomax pulled it off. He got many art funds, the Rothschilds and the Gettys plus many private donations to contribute and after various tax concessions the price had been reduced to £ 2M the wine cooler was coming to Temple Newsam. It resulted in many events, the most important was the Wentworth Castle Conference, sponsored by the Silver Society and attracting many international scholars whose interesting lectures were edited by Patrick Eyres and James Lomax in the publication *Diplomats, Goldsmiths and Baroque Court Culture: Lord Raby in Berlin, The Hague and Wentworth Castle*, The Wentworth Castle Heritage Trust 2014.