

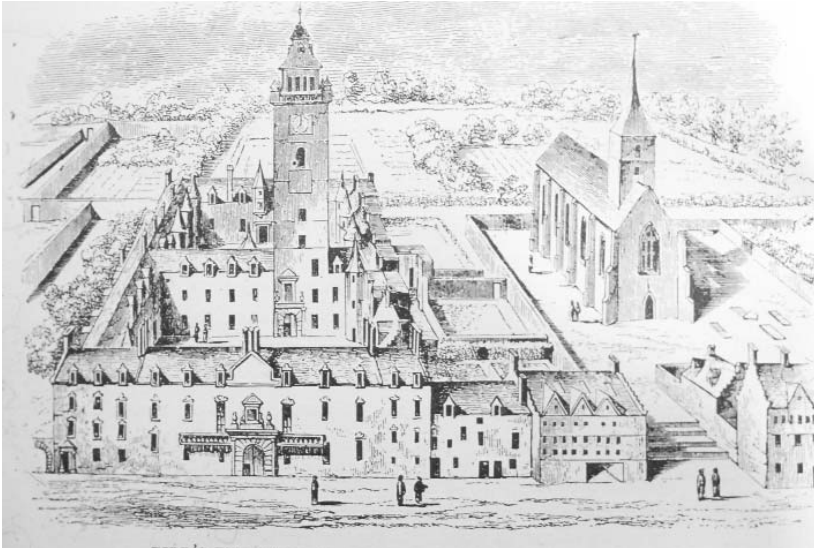
GREAT COLLECTORS / COLLECTIONNEURS CÉLÈBRES

William Hunter (1718-1783)

It was stated at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1782 that Dr. Hunter's coin cabinet was second only to that of the King of France. It was indeed the best in Britain, surpassing even the royal collection of King George III. The 18th century witnessed the growth of many cabinets assembled by professional men of the Church, Law and Medicine but few matched the great aristocratic collections. Thus Hunter's cabinet was exceptional, but he was an exceptional man.

William Hunter was born near Glasgow in 1718, the son of a minor landowner. He attended Glasgow University from 1731 until 1736. Among his professors was Francis Hutcheson renowned throughout Europe as one of its leading philosophers. This was the period of the Enlightenment in which Scotland was then playing a major role as acknowledged even by Voltaire. It was perhaps this lively and open environment which diverted Hunter from his intended choice of the Church (of Scotland) as a career into that of Medicine. His time at the University was to have a major influence on his subsequent work, collecting and character.

In 1737 Hunter began to train in surgery under William Cullen an old family friend who had set up a practice in nearby Hamilton, the seat of the powerful Dukes



View of the Old College, or University of Glasgow, where Hunter studied 1731-6.

of Hamilton. Cullen later became Professor of Medicine at Glasgow and was often referred to as the father of Scottish medicine. The two became life-long friends and Hunter recognised that he owed much to this early mentor.

However, two years later he left Cullen to study anatomy briefly at Edinburgh University before moving to London. There he studied midwifery under Dr. William Smellie during 1740 and the following year became assistant to yet another Scot, the royal physician Dr. James Douglas and tutor to his son. Despite the death of Dr. Douglas in 1742 Hunter remained tutor to the young Douglas. The next year he attended anatomy lectures in Paris and again in 1748 he visited the medical schools in both

Paris and Leiden. He had started giving his own anatomy lectures in 1746 and in 1749 he left the Douglas household and opened an anatomy school in Covent Garden. At the same time he continued to practice as a physician.



William Hunter, c.1764-65, by Allan Ramsay (Scottish, 1713-1784), oil on canvas GLAHA 44026

Over the next three decades Hunter's career flourished. In 1750, on a rare return visit to Scotland, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Medicine by Glasgow University.

In London he pioneered the teaching of anatomy, was a leader in the development of midwifery and was one of the most respected and fashionable accoucheurs with a clientele which included the highest ranks of society. He was appointed Physician in Extraordinary to Queen Charlotte in 1762 and assisted in the births of two future British kings, George IV and William IV. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1767 and was appointed as the first Professor of Anatomy at the Royal Academy of Arts founded by George III in 1768. The same year Hunter also became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. In 1774 he published his extraordinary and still respected *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*. Foreign Associateship of the Royal Society of Medicine Paris and the Academy of Sciences Paris followed in 1780 and 1782.

William Hunter never married nor is known to have fathered any children. He devoted his time and energy to his work and collecting. He was relatively well off and there is the hint that his fortune may have been increased by a lottery win. In any event much of it was spent on his collections. Hunter had “inherited” the medical books and preparations of his employer James Douglas on the latter’s death in 1742 and it was these that formed the basis of his own collections. Hunter was very skilled in making both wet and dry medical preparations and he was aided in this by a number of excellent assistants including his brother John who worked with him for a decade from 1748. John, too, later became eminent and famous, his own preparations forming the lesser Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons of England in London. Meanwhile William Hunter’s medical collection was recognised as one of the best in existence and drew many visitors from Europe and America. It was actively used for teaching and research.

This in turn necessitated an interest in the natural world. Hunter’s natural history collection soon contained numerous stuffed animals, animal skins and skeletons, and fossils from around the world. There was also an important entomological collection with many type specimens as well as a comprehensive herbarium. Corals and shells complemented numerous rocks and minerals. Valuable and important first contact material was obtained from the South Seas and North-West America through the explorations of Captain James Cook. Meanwhile the number of medical books had increased greatly and the library’s scope was extended to manuscripts, incunabula and other printed works. Hunter also acquired many paintings including works by Rembrandt, Chardin and Stubbs as well as important prints and drawings. Hunter himself was painted by Ramsay and Reynolds.

Among the first paintings Hunter bought were some portraits of eminent medical men acquired in 1755 at one of the earliest and most important 18th century sales in Britain, that of another famous doctor Richard Mead. He also bought Mead’s mummy though this has long since disintegrated. Mead owned a large coin cabinet and it is noteworthy that Hunter is not listed among the purchasers of the coins and medals. His interest in numismatics appears to have developed later, probably as his interests and collections widened and he recognised the value of coinage to historical study and understanding. However it is clear that he was seriously interested in the subject by 1770 and for the next twelve years he set about building up a comprehensive collection, particularly of classical coins. He spent the then huge sum of over £22,000 on this with the result that on his death in 1783 it surpassed even the royal collection of George III.

Hunter preferred to buy complete collections in order to remove specimens he did not already possess or to replace items he already had, but in poorer condition, with

better pieces from the new cabinet. The resulting duplicates were sold at two major auctions in 1777 and 1778 thus making Hunter's final collection remarkably free of duplication. Between 1770 and 1783 he purchased 22 complete cabinets. The prices ranged from £138 to £8,000 and in total reached £18,000, by far the greater part of the money he spent on acquiring his coins and medals. Sixteen of the cabinets were bought in England, mainly London. One was aristocratic, that of the Earl of Sandwich, and the rest mainly of professional origin, usually merchants, clergymen and doctors and often acquired from their widows or heirs. Of the six foreign cabinets bought five originated in Italy and one in Austria. His attempts to buy in France and Spain came to nothing and he does not appear to have sought material elsewhere in Europe.

The very first purchase recorded is a cabinet of some 450 Syrian coins, regal and civic including Roman Provincial issues, put together at Aleppo by the Rev. William Dawes. Hunter bought them from Dawes's brother and, unfortunately, a somewhat bitter dispute arose over the duplicates which were to be returned. It shows Hunter to be a tough negotiator yet he was in the right and ultimately vindicated. He was, however, also generous, in still giving to the widow of the Rev. John Swinton of Oxford the prior agreed price for her husband's cabinet though it turned out not to be so good and valuable as first thought. In gratitude Mrs. Swinton presented Hunter with a number of Swinton's Greek vases. However, when Sir William Hamilton sent Hunter an overpriced and disappointing cabinet from Italy, Hamilton had to sustain most of the loss. Hunter was thus an avid but careful collector, both firm and fair in his purchases. By 1780 the best numismatic material coming on the market was being acquired by Hunter, as indeed was the situation in terms of antiquarian books. One collector of coins prayed that he would be able "to keep mine from his clutches".

The major cabinet acquired by Hunter was that of Matthew Duane, a lawyer in London and a Fellow of the Royal Society. His coin collecting and the purchase of his cabinet by Hunter merited mention on his memorial in the cathedral in Newcastle: "...his singular skill, judgement, and taste, in choosing and collecting a most complete series of Syrian, Phoenician, Grecian, Roman and other coins, now deposited in the Museum of the late William Hunter, M.D., for the illustration and confirmation of History". Although bought in 1776 for £8,000, it was paid for in seven instalments until the end of 1779. The Duane cabinet contained specimens from those of the Earl of Oxford sold in 1742, Richard Mead, and Martin Folkes, one of the first authors on the English coinage, as well as the highly significant collection of Sicilian coins owned by the Prince of Torremuzza.

A noteworthy purchase is the cabinet bought from Mrs. Smith in 1777 for £580 though unfortunately no details survive of what must have been a large collection.

Mrs. Smith was the widow of “Consul Smith”, Joseph Smith sometime British Consul at Venice, whose main collections, including coins and books, had been sold to King George III in 1763 for £20,000. This appears to represent a substantial residue or subsequent collection. One of Hunter’s latest acquisitions was the Hess cabinet from Vienna, especially noteworthy for its large group of Roman Imperial gold coins which greatly contributed to one of the glories of the Hunter Coin Cabinet. This was purchased for £2,400 in 1782. It was the property of Anna von Hess but was in reality the cabinet of her grand-father Joseph de France.

However, Hunter also purchased in the more normal way through dealers. The first of these was Thomas Snelling, who was also responsible for some early catalogues of English coins. From 1770 there were over a dozen transactions ranging from £30 to £300 for unspecified items until Snelling’s death in 1773. About 1776 he was replaced by John Whyte who conducted over 30 transactions with Hunter until 1782. These were mostly for smaller sums and mainly for English coins. There has been some suspicion as to Whyte’s probity and at least three rare Anglo-Saxon coins in the Hunter cabinet acquired from Whyte have been deemed altered.

By the time Hunter was collecting in the late 18th century coin auctions were frequent in London but on the whole he made few purchases in this way. This was possibly because he preferred to buy at stated prices rather than risk the uncertainty of bidding. There were also numerous individual purchases, for example the rare aureus of Diadumenian bought from Molini, a bookseller, for £3-13-6 in 1772 and a gold coin of Aquitaine purchased in Southampton in 1776 for the large sum of £22.

Once it was known that the Hunter Cabinet was intended to be as complete as possible and to advance the knowledge of history through its publication several donations were made. The most important was that of the then unique early third century BC gold stater of Athens donated by King George III. Horace Walpole, writer and creator of the gothic revival Strawberry Hill allowed Hunter to choose a selection from his own cabinet. James Bruce, “Abyssinian Bruce” explorer of the Nile, donated Greek coins as well as selling Hunter his superb group of Ptolemaic gold coins. The East India Company gave a group of 20 gold mohurs from a hoard found near Calcutta. His brother-in-law, James Baillie, sent some Scottish coins from Glasgow.

Hunter was able to obtain specimens, patterns and proofs, mainly in gold, direct from the Royal Mint in London. He also purchased medals directly from medallists. A group of Jacobite medals was bought from the Hamerani in Rome and specimens of his English medals were provided by John Kirk, and after the latter’s death by Mrs. Kirk.

It was not all one way. In 1781 Hunter sent a box of Scottish coins, 24 gold, 42 silver and 22 billon and copper, to the newly founded Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for its museum. Hunter had been elected an honorary member earlier that year. He donated one of the coins from the Calcutta hoard noted above to King Louis XVI for the French royal collection. Nineteen of the coins remain in Glasgow, the 20th is now in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris.

William Hunter was a busy professional man heavily involved in both the teaching and practice of medicine. He also devoted a great amount of time to his extensive collections but, apart from the help of dealers, donors and fellow collectors, he depended on the assistance of a small number of dedicated experts to organise and catalogue his museum.

Fabricius, for instance, worked on his insect collection. In regard to his coin cabinet, his friend Charles Combe was his main collaborator and adviser. Combe was a collector himself but sold his cabinet, mainly of Roman coins, to Hunter in 1777. From 1776 he purchased coins on over 50 occasions for Hunter. He was responsible for the catalogue of Hunter's coins of the Greek cities published in 1782, the first to use a modern format.

As a Trustee, he compiled the manuscript catalogue of the Hunter coin collection after Hunter's death.

Sir William Hamilton, British Ambassador to Naples from 1774 to 1800 was another collaborator. Hamilton is better known for his collection of Greek vases sold to the British Museum and his wife Emma, who ran off with Lord Nelson. He does not appear to have been so knowledgeable on coins and his purchases on Hunter's behalf caused more problems than benefit. Hunter had an agent in Marseilles who was responsible for obtaining a second group of Ptolemaic gold coins once belonging to Bruce. He also corresponded with Barthélemy at the royal cabinet in Paris and with Eckhel at the imperial cabinet in Vienna.

On his death early in 1783 William Hunter possessed an outstanding cabinet containing over 30,000 coins and medals, most in superb condition and including many rarities and unique examples. There were approximately 12,000 Greek civic and regal coins, including 5,000 of what is now more commonly known as the Roman Provincial series.

The Roman series consisted of some 2,000 Republican issues and a further 12,000 Imperial coins from Augustus to Zeno. Among the Imperial was an impressive group of 1500 gold aurei and solidi. He also owned a small but representative collection of Byzantine coins. In the medieval and modern series Hunter collected only

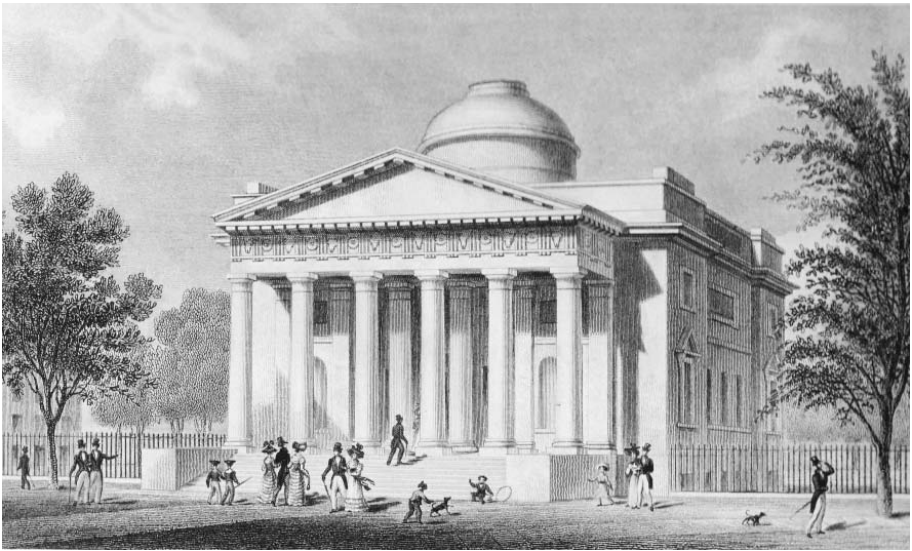


Medal of William Hunter by Edward Burch 1774, depicting Hunter in surgeon's cap and gown; the reverse shows the silver cup, with dissecting scene, presented to Hunter in 1761.

issues of the British Isles thus possessing only a few incidental European coins. He possessed a good collection of Anglo-Saxon coins as well as later medieval and modern English coins. His holdings of the Scottish series issued from 1136 to the Act of Union with England in 1707 was smaller but contained some outstanding specimens. Hunter's medal collection consisted of approximately 2,000 items, half belonging to the British series dating from the early 16th century up to the latest produced in 1781. It also contained a small group of Italian Renaissance medals, a large run of the Papal series and good examples of the Tuscan baroque medals. Issues from France and the rest of Europe made up the remainder. Groups of jettons and 17th century English trade tokens completed the cabinet.

In 1766 Hunter had purchased a property in Great Windmill Street, close to Piccadilly Circus, and had this greatly extended to provide personal quarters including a study, a museum, and the school of anatomy with a lecture theatre, dissecting rooms and assistants' rooms. This no longer exists but a description by Fabricius of the museum in 1782 survives. It consisted of a large ground floor room with a small gallery running round all four sides. "In the middle of the room itself are two rows of double mahogany cabinets for the collections. The coin collection is the most important of all." Unfortunately these cabinets were not brought to Glasgow and appear to have been sold in 1807.

Hunter possessed a numismatic library of approximately 100 volumes ranging from the 16th century up to the first volume of the catalogue of his own cabinet pub-



The old Hunterian Museum designed by William Stark and opened in 1807

lished in 1782. These survive as part of the Hunterian books and manuscripts housed in the Special Collections department of Glasgow University Library. Also housed there are the Hunter Papers which include over 200 letters, receipts, lists, and notes relating to the coin cabinet. Hunter's Account Book listing his coin purchases from 1770 to 1783 and the manuscript catalogue of his coins and medals compiled by his Trustees shortly after 1783 also survive.

William Hunter bequeathed his collections to Glasgow University and they were transferred from London in 1807. They were housed in a new, purpose built museum designed by William Stark. This was demolished subsequent to the University's move to its current site in 1870.

It will do no harm to repeat yet again Hunter's best known quotation, "To acquire knowledge and to communicate it to others has been the pleasure, the business, and ambition of my life". His coin cabinet played a large part in this and continues to fulfil his aspirations and wishes.

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