

**William Cleverly Alexander**  
**1840–1916**  
**Collector and Philanthropist**



William Cleverly Alexander was a wealthy banker and ultimately a senior partner of his father's firm, Alexander's Discount, which still operates as a discount house (bill broker) in London, England. His father, George William Alexander (1802–1890), was a Quaker and a founding member of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in 1839.

A noted collector and connoisseur of Japanese and Chinese art, Alexander was a member of the Burlington Fine Arts Club in London and an early patron of the artist James McNeill Whistler. He commissioned works from Whistler, including portraits of his three daughters: *Harmony in Grey and Green*; *Miss Cicely Alexander*; *Miss May Alexander*; and *Portrait of Miss Grace Alexander*. When Alexander moved from Harringay House, Hornsey, to Aubrey House in the London suburb of

Kensington in 1873, Whistler worked on the decorative schemes for the reception rooms. Alexander also had a country house, Heathfield Park in Sussex, where he died in 1916 after falling down the basement stairs.

Alexander's Chinese collection contained both "late" Qing dynasty porcelains and jades that were popular in the late nineteenth century as well as "early" wares of the Han, Tang, and Song periods. He was among the lenders to exhibitions held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1895 (sixteen pieces), 1896 (five pieces), and 1910 (sixty-one pieces), to the City of Manchester Art Gallery's Exhibition of Chinese Applied Art in 1913 (fifty-five pieces), and to exhibitions presented at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Over two days in May 1931, his daughters sold his collection of Chinese ceramics at Sotheby's in 355 lots for a total of £15,697.15.0. The Chinese art collector Sir Percival David purchased a significant part of the collection. Alexander's daughters also bequeathed his collection of paintings to the National Gallery in London and, through the National Art Collections Fund, to museums and galleries throughout Great Britain.

The British artist and critic Roger Fry paid Alexander the following compliment in an obituary in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1916: "He was the most unpretentious of men. He seemed incapable of regarding his wealth or the quite remarkable taste which guided its expenditure as any claim to distinction. In contradistinction to so many collectors who use their possessions to make status, he seemed almost to apologize for his good taste and his good fortune."

## Literature

"Death of W. C. Alexander," *Times* (London), (April 18, 1916), p. 12.

Roger Fry, "Mr. Herbert P. Horne and Mr. William Cleverly Alexander," *Burlington Magazine* 29, no. 158 (May 1916), pp. 81–82.

*Who Was Who, 1916–28* (1929), p. 14.

R. L. Hobson, *Old Furniture X*, no. 36 (May 1930), pp. 3–9.

Sotheby and Company, *Catalogue of the very choice and well-known collection of Chinese pottery, stoneware and porcelain, the property of William Cleverly Alexander, sold by his daughters, the Misses Alexander* (May 6–7, 1931).

R. L. Hobson, Bernard Rackham, and Bernard King, *Chinese Ceramics in Private Collections* (London, 1931), pp. 1–30.

Gordon Nares, "Aubrey House, Kensington, The home of the Misses Alexander," *Country Life* (May 2, 1957), pp. 872–75 and (May 9, 1957), pp. 922–25.

Stacey Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums: The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560–1960* (Bern, 2007), pp. 70–71.

Roy Davids and Dominic Jellinek, *Provenance: Collectors, Dealers and Scholars in the Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain and America* (Oxford, England, 2011), pp. 45–46.

*The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, online edition, University of Glasgow; see biography of William Cleverly Alexander:

[http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/people/biog/?bid=Alex\\_WC&firstname=&surname=Alexander](http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/people/biog/?bid=Alex_WC&firstname=&surname=Alexander)

Photograph of Alexander by Elliott and Fry

February 29, 2016