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Behind the veneer

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Behind the veneer

The Beurdeley family flourished in the fevered atmosphere of France's Second Empire. [Camille Mestdagh](#) charts a dynasty that provided antiques for the imperial family – and made fine furniture themselves





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The history of the Beurdeley family is that of three men. From 1814 to 1919, three generations devoted their lives not only to creating an outstanding collection – they are counted amongst the greatest collectors of their time – but the family also made furniture themselves. The workshop was begun by Louis Auguste Alfred in the 1850s and developed in the 1870s by Emmanuel Alfred who appears to be the most talented of the dynasty. He became the foremost cabinet maker of his time, supplying the finest furniture and gilt bronzes to the most influential international collectors and European royalty. As they were also renowned as *marchands de curiosités*, it is not surprising that prestigious museums such as the Louvre, the Musee d’Orsay the Hermitage, the Metropolitan and the Wallace Collection possess in their collections a painting, a drawing, a ceramic or a work of art that at some stage belonged to one of the Beurdeleys.

To French ears, Beurdeley sounds an English name – Bernard Dorival in his article about the family points out that it is originally a French adaptation of ‘beardless’. However, the family came from Cote d’Or in Burgundy. The patriarch, Jean Beurdeley (1772-1853), was the son of a wine grower; he fought in the Polish campaign and, after the Treaty of Tilsit in July 1807, came to Paris where his son, Louis Auguste Alfred Beurdeley, was born in 1808. He first established himself as a *marchand de curiosités* in the Marais district, before moving ten years later to rue

Saint Honoré, behind the prestigious rue de Rivoli, the new thoroughfare that Napoleon Bonaparte had carved through the centre of Paris. At this time, it seems Beurdeley was of service to an English gentleman who bequeathed the family a large sum of money. Beurdeley invested it in acquiring an 18th-century building, the Pavillon de Hanovre on Boulevard des Italiens. Apart from the quality of its architecture, the mansion had an interesting history. It had been

“Fortunately for Beurdeley, Haussmann built the Opera house only a few metres away”

built for the Marechal de Richelieu, who led the invasion of Hanover but who better known as a man of exceptionally loose morals and the inspiration for Valmont in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.

Most of all, the mansion was perfectly positioned to be a very profitable investment. A mere 20 years later Napoleon III commissioned Baron Haussmann to improve the area by creating wide boulevards that would score through the heart of the capital. Fortunately for Beurdeley, Haussmann built the Opera house only a few metres away from the Pavillon, which would become one of the only few *hôtels particuliers* left in this fashionable district.

The Pavillon de Hanovre became the family home, but it was not until his son, Louis Auguste Alfred, took over the



antiques business in 1834, that the shop was transferred there. Louis proceeded to develop the business brilliantly, and from the 1850s he was generally regarded as one of the most successful Parisian dealers, selling paintings by masters such as Chardin, Boucher and Fragonard, but also porcelain, bronzes and furniture. In 1852, he married Constance Virginie Fleytas, who had quite an unusual past. A very attractive Creole from New Orleans, the daughter of a doctor but also a considerably rich widow, Fleytas owned a house near Paris, three houses and land in New Orleans – and three slaves. She had left Louisiana because of tensions between Creoles and Americans, and came to Paris in the 1840s with a son from her first marriage. She gave birth to a second son, the third of the Beurdeley dynasty, Emmanuel Alfred (1847-1919). Considering the moral standards of the time, she could not officially recognise her son, whose birth preceded her second marriage. She died 14 years later, at the age of 54 at another family home in rue de Clichy.



“Mamma had only been to see the Beurdeley Curiosities (...) but the high prices frighten everybody”

Later, their son Emmanuel Alfred Beurdeley would keep this house as his home and ‘private museum’, where he exhibited his collections of paintings, drawings and works of art.

Louis Auguste Alfred Beurdeley not only married well, but also had a flourishing business, so he could afford to participate in two of the exceptional international events of the century: the Great Exhibitions of 1855 and 1867 in Paris. At the time, his reputation was firmly established as an antique dealer but also as an *ébéniste*. It is not surprising that when he received the gold medal, a journalist described him as “the favourite of the aristocracy”. He could count among his clients the Duc d’Aumale, for whom he embellished its interiors of Château de Chantilly, and he was commissioned to supply the trousseau chest for the wedding of Eugenie, Countess of Teba to Napoleon III – as well as provide several pieces of furniture commissioned for the Palais des Tuileries. Members of the Paris and London branches of the Rothschild family were also regular clients. In a letter in 1864, Lionel de Rothschild wrote to his son Leopold: “Mamma had only been to see the Beurdeley Curiosities (...) but the high prices frighten everybody.”

After having completed his law degree, Emmanuel Alfred Beurdeley joined his father in the business, and succeeded him shortly before the Great Exhibition of 1878, where his success was such that he later received one of the highest French distinctions: Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur. By then he



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had developed the workshop but was, above all, considered as an innovative furniture maker. This is evident when admiring the *secrétaire* with marquetry and *pietre dure* to be offered at Bonhams: the ingenuity of the composition and the combination of both techniques are *du grand art*. The Exhibitions of 1889 and 1893 were both a great success, and thanks to a photograph of his stand in Chicago in 1893, we can see why he was – and still is – considered as the master of French furniture makers of the time. He was proud to declare that he always employed the best artists and craftsmen so that there was quality in the execution as well as the design.

This was the apogee of Emmanuel Beurdeley's career. Tragically, his wife died in childbirth at the age of 36, leaving him with three children, so he interrupted his brilliant career as a furniture maker to devote himself to his collections of Old Master and 19th-century paintings and drawings. It was a vast accumulation. After his death in 1919, more than 20 auctions were needed to disperse it. In his own house – where every inch of wall space was covered with pictures – one can also see his favourite items of furniture, pieces that he had made for himself and that he bequeathed to his descendants. It is these pieces of furniture either made by Emmanuel Alfred Beurdeley or from his stupendous collection that are offered at Bonhams' Fine Furniture sale in New Bond Street. The pieces are of particular significance as furniture made by Beurdeley rarely comes to market. The design and quality of these works



– some of the pieces are decorated with *pietre dure*, lacquer and porcelain – is exceptional and there is the added cachet that these were the works that he chose to leave to his children as the legacy of his talent.

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Camille Mestdagh, author of *L'ameublement d'art français* (1850-1900), is a specialist in Bonhams' department of Fine European Furniture.

Sale: Fine European Furniture, Sculpture and Works of Art
New Bond Street
Wednesday 6 July at 2pm
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