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THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

The Medicini of Victorian England

A riveting new show mines the art niches of industrialists. **Claudia Pritchard** reports

The bloom that presides over the first room of *Cotton to Gold*, a revelatory new show opening in London at the end of the month, fashioned more than premium fabric: its relentless mechanism drove a passion for collecting whose legacy is enjoyed to this day. Prospering principally from the textile industry, discerning 19th-century gentlemen entrepreneurs of the North-west ploughed their new wealth into the acquisition of fine things, from books to glass, prints, watercolours, ancient coins, natural history specimens and icons – extraordinary treasures brought together for the first time.

In their lifetimes, these Medici of Victorian England might have shown their objets d'art to a few close friends, squirreling them away in purpose-built cabinets. But upon death, many bequeathed them to museums and galleries for the enjoyment of the public – and with the astuteness that had marked their working lives, they gave them not to already well-stocked national collections, but to their hometowns, ensuring a degree of personal prestige beyond the grave. Thus Blackburn, and not Bloombury, boasts some of the rarest books in world, among them the first book to be printed in English, a Third Folio of Shakespeare, and a first edition of *Gulliver's Travels*.

The collectors were not always so erudite and intellectual as the bookish Robert Edward Hart, who was in the business of rope-making and who collected those titles alongside some exceedingly rare coins. Joseph Briggs left Accrington at 17 to seek his fortune in New York and returned with 140 examples of Tiffany glass, among them a shamelessly gaudy glass mosaic featuring a pair of cockatoos that was a recent star of the BBC's *Antiques Roadshow*. Bequeathed to the Hawthorth Art Gallery in his native town, they constitute the largest collection of Tiffany glass in Europe.

His taste for the outlandish was shared by Burnley's William T Taylor, who in the 1890s headed for the gold mines of South Africa, and made his money in electrical engineering. Exploring in Peru, with the indifference to local sensibilities that was normal at the time, he burrowed to the heart of a burial site near Chaplanca, came face to face with the mummy of a 12th-century nobleman, packed up the ancestor, and offered it to Towneley Hall Museum in his native Burnley. The bound and crouching figure will be among the most arresting loans to *Cotton to Gold*, at Two Temple Place, the ornate Thames-view home of



US entrepreneur William Waldorf Astor and his idea of an English country house. Completed in 1895, its fantastical décor, nooks and crannies will make for a spectacular and contemporaneous backdrop. Displaying human remains with the respect that has been learnt by succeeding generations has been one of the challenges for curators Jack Hartnell of the nearby Courtauld Institute, and Cynthia Johnson of the Institute of English Studies at the University of London, who have found a suitably restrained temporary resting place in the Great Hall for the fragile being.

The more famous fine art works featured will include watercolours by JMW Turner and male nude drawings by Millais. But while the fact that Englishmen should buy English work is unsurprising, many of their pieces came from further afield, such as those of Thomas Boys Lewis, the owner of Springfield cotton mill in Blackburn. Lewis's international business dealings, the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the influence of his artist wife Alice all combined to widen his tastes. His collection of more than 1,000 Japanese prints, including works by Hokusai and Hiroshige, depicted actors, courtesans and sumo wrestlers, as well as aesthetic landscapes and historical scenes. He also acquired 13 Orthodox Christian icons from Greece, Russia and the eastern Mediterranean, sumptuous interpretations of traditional votive images.

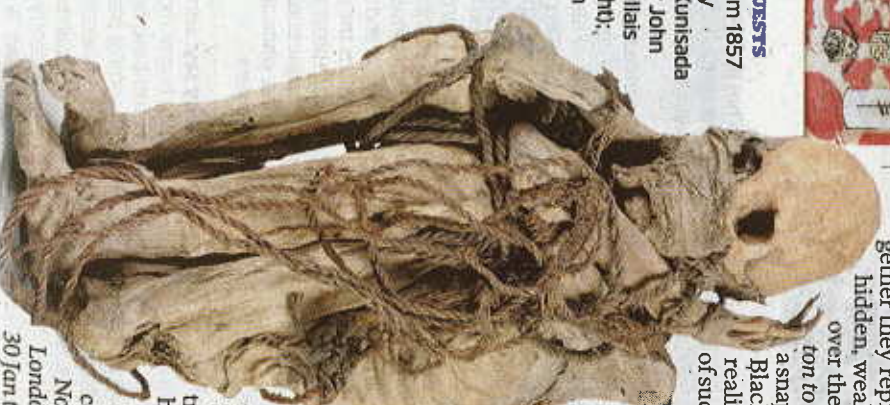
Religion was as much a driving force as mechanisation for some collectors, who engaged in posthumous philanthropy, perhaps storing up treasures in heaven



by dispersing their treasures on earth. Hart, however, valued printed and handwritten books important to many faiths, demonstrating a perhaps unexpected religious inclusiveness and tolerance. So, as well as his *Christian Book of Hours*, with its jewel-like illuminations, the exhibition will include his precious copies of the Koran, a Jewish Torah scroll and other sacred texts. Hart's own religious convictions were put into practice with the establishment of an orphanage in Blackburn that was the foundation of today's Child Action Northwest, a charity caring for vulnerable children in the Blackburn area.

But what does it all add up to, this glorious attic of curios, bibelots and hidden gems? The answer is, something much bigger than the sum of the parts. For while many of the pieces are magnificent by any measure, and others undeniably eye-catching, together they represent the extraordinary, often hidden, wealth of provincial collections all over the country. What visitors to *Cotton to Gold* will take away is not only a snapshot of the cabinets of Burnley, Blackburn and Accrington, but the realisation that there are hundreds of such smaller museums and galleries conserving local legacies of world-class importance.

The exhibition comes in the wake of Northampton Council's £16m sale of its 4,000-year-old statue of the ancient Egyptian scribe Sektjenka, which dismayed art-lovers and offended Egypt, which would have liked it back. It is by no means the only such big-money sale by a local authority in recent years, and there is concern within museum circles that other cash-strapped councils might follow suit. The curators hope that visitors will leave the show with a mission to root out, and if needs be, defend, the treasures in their own museums, heirs to the great collectors.



BEST REQUESTS
A print from 1857 (above), by Uragawa Kunisada II, nude by John Everett Millais (above right), a Peruvian mummy (right)

Cotton to Gold: Extraordinary collections of the Industrial North-west, Two Temple Place, London (twotempleplace.org), 30 Jan to 19 Apr