

Vera Salomons' Postcard Collection

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'Self Portrait'
Vera Salomons
1918

When visiting Salomon's Estate we naturally think of the three David Salomons because that is how the museum there presents its history. Next time you visit, reconsider. If it wasn't for a woman, Vera Salomons, that museum would not exist.

Vera, born in 1888, was one of five children. A Jewish heiress who became a VAD nurse during WW1, a divorcee, she later worked in Jerusalem, using her inheritance to promote a shared understanding of Palestinian and Jewish culture. She was great-niece and sole heir to the Salomons estates of Sir David Salomons, the first Jewish Lord Mayor of London and the first Jewish person to address the House of Commons. Related through marriage to the Rothschilds and Montefiore family, Sir David made his nephew David Lionel (Vera's father) his heir. David Lionel Salomons (DLS) was an inventor and lecturer in science, a collector of books and art, and had a great interest in motor transport, owning

the second car or 'Horseless carriage' in England and organising the first Motor Show in the world (in Tunbridge Wells, 1895). Vera's brother, David Reginald Salomons (DRS) was educated at Eton and Cambridge and travelled extensively in Europe and to the Far East, but drowned during WW1 on HMS Hythe.

The Salomons Museum was created in 1937 by a Deed of Conveyance between Vera and the Board of Guardians and Trustees for the relief of the Jewish Poor. Its contents are dedicated as memorials to 'David Salomons, First Baronet, 1797-1873 ... David Salomons, Second Baronet, 1851-1925 ... and David Reginald Herman Philip Salomons, 1885-1915.'

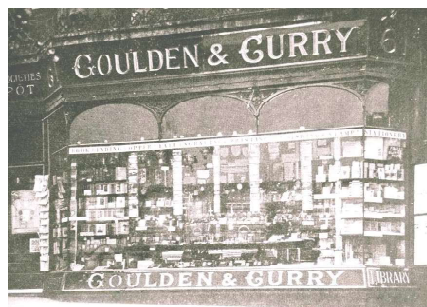
This is how the family history is displayed in the museum and perhaps reflects Vera's character as she became her father's amanuensis after her brother's death. Amongst the collection is a set of postcard albums belonging to Vera with postmarks between 1900 and 1913. The albums have the maker's label

of Tunbridge Wells retailer *Goulden & Curry* (right).

Previously unresearched ephemera, these albums provide a unique opportunity to explore the culture of Victorian postcard collecting (postcards were an invention of the late 1870s). The gentle extraction of 490 cards, to inspect both front and back, enabled connections to be made to extend family biography. The private correspondence written on them demonstrates how Victorian verbosity was replaced with brevity and, in Vera's collection, the use of coded messages. There are no examples of cards, though, sent by Vera, all are addressed to her.

The collection places Vera at ages ten to twenty-three. The illustrations on the postcards, mass-produced miniature reproductions of art-works, demonstrate the rise of cultural tourism, with postcards from both London galleries and museums, and from countries such as France and Italy. The majority were sent to Vera by her brother DRS, who was three years older, and they build a record of his travels around Europe with their father. Vera seems only to have travelled within Britain, yet her collection provides an address book for the family. There are the family's home addresses of 49 Grosvenor Street in London, and Broomhill, Tunbridge Wells; but also holiday addresses: Queen's Bay Hotel, Joppa, Edinburgh (1905) and Fors Hotel, Lynmouth, North Devon (1906) situating Vera at a location in time, acting as a form of diary.

Vera's collecting habit could be regarded as a traditional female



pastime, but might also be the product of her home environment where collecting was a way of life. Each Christmas her father published a collection of 'maxims', to be sent out in lieu of cards. In one of them he wrote 'all men should be collectors, to preserve history, but each collection should have an object in view' (*Reflections and Sayings: Sir David L Salomons, Bart, 1906-1917*). Vera's 'object' was the art postcard.

The close relationship with her brother is demonstrated by the sheer number of postcards from DRS. These refer to postcards from Vera, hinting at regular levels of correspondence between them, but unfortunately these have not survived. Code is frequently used between the two siblings (see page 12, top left) and family secrets are hinted at with 'I suppose father has told you all'. They portray Vera's role, as perceived by DRS, of family mediator: he often asks her to 'tell mother' or 'please thank Nurse for the letter', reinforcing Vera as both complicit and at the same time equal to her brother and her status as conduit.

Interestingly, postcards written in French from her governess Pauline Wermelinger indicate that Vera's home-

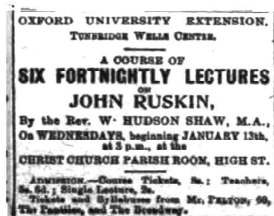


Lady Hamilton by George Romney. The text beneath is partly in code.

education was of a high standard, whilst we can also track DRS's more traditional, male, educational journey through Eton and Cambridge. Her father expressed his attitude to the education of women in his booklet *The Ladies of England* (1875), but unfortunately the museum copy is missing. James Parkes, though, in *The Story of Three David Salomons at Broomhill* (1930), provides a short summary, explaining how DLS was in favour of women's education, advocating formation of a 'National Society for the Employment of Women, and for the Promotion of Women's interests'.

The siblings' correspondence also refers to literature, as DRS is seen to support Vera in her studies; often discussing fiction and poetry. For example on a postcard of George Reynolds' *Age of Innocence* he writes: 'I am afraid that Ruskin will not be very interesting, but as you are or have been attending lectures about him I thought you might like it' and he mentions Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* on another Reynolds' card: *Cherub*

Choir. An examination of the *Kent & Sussex Courier* (1906) traces an advertisement (see below) for 'Oxford University Extension, Tunbridge Wells Centre. A course of Six Fortnightly Lectures on John Ruskin, by the Rev W Hudson Shaw, M.A.' Perhaps the same lectures DRS makes reference to.



The albums contain various visual presentations of women's roles. Many are traditional, reinforcing the female ideals of mother and nurturer. But as previously noted, it is DRS who travels to Europe not Vera, so potentially these postcards were his way of extending Vera's education and sharing the gallery experiences he had in Europe. So traditional mother and child images in the albums are juxtaposed with those challenging perceived female roles of the time. Some postcards are self-portraits by female artists such as *Angelica Kauffman by Herself* (see p.13, top left) presenting an image of a female creating her own work. It could be suggested that DRS was encouraging Vera to think about her female role and personal development as a woman who is at ease in a man's world. Some of the art is controversial for a young girl to own. including nudes. DRS writes 'I think I had better give it & not send it you'(sic) written on the back



Self portrait of Angelica Kauffman

of *The Knight Errant* by Millais with a semi-naked female. Images of women such as Varotari's *Judith and Holofernes* also raise questions as they dispel conventional gender roles, presenting women as seductresses and murderers whilst also representing women as heroines. Inclusion could be for collection purposes or possibly the albums were Vera's 'safe environment' for study.

Collectively, these albums create a many-faceted impression of Vera's interest in art. Although not her own work, the albums are constructed by her and so they are her personal memorabilia and possibly a form of self-portrait.

In her actual self-portrait (see page 10) Vera uses her camera rather than *Judith's* knife or *Kauffman's* paintbrush. The image is fascinating in its striking resemblance to the triple *Portrait of Cardinal Richelieu* (above right).

The postcard has three profiles, Vera's self-portrait has five. Possibly Vera recognised she had many sides to her personality and roles. On the reverse



Cardinal Richelieu by Philippe de Champaigne. A model for Vera's Self Portrait?

of the self-portrait she writes to her father about her work as a nurse in WW1, in a medical ward caring for wounded soldiers, demonstrating two roles, a nurse and a daughter; while demonstrating her interest in the new art of photography. Vera later photographed engravings from her father's eighteenth-century library producing illustrated titles on the works of Gravelot, Choffard and Eisen.

The collection of DRS's postcards to Vera, while seemingly recording his life experiences, ultimately became a memorial to Vera herself when she died in 1969. Vera preserved part of herself alongside her art postcards.

The collection can be regarded as a modern-day jigsaw puzzle presenting clues to a way of life which no longer exists. Casual comments of 'not much news' call to us from a past generation who had their future ahead of them - all to be obliterated and changed irrevocably by WW1. Thankfully, embodied within the albums there are many more stories and connections yet to be revealed of the Salomons and their world.

