



# THE FAN MUSEUM

## FANS OF CLEOPATRA

**F**rom the time of her theatrical death in 30 BC, the story of the legendary Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra VII, the last of the dynasty of Ptolemies, who reigned from 51 BC to 30 BC (the first Ptolemy, a Macedonian, was the founder of Alexandria, Alexander the Great) has fascinated historians, artists, poets and playwrights throughout history.

The Fan Museum's Logo, which features a silver tetradrachm of Cleopatra VII of Egypt, has a significance which is not apparent to many people. I feel that the time has come for me to make clear the origins of The Fan Museum, while paying tribute to the antecedents of this unique place, in the hope that it may continue to thrive as it has – in the last thirty years.



*Silver tetradrachm, Askalon (51-30 BC),  
The Fan Museum, LDFAN2014.140  
Image not to scale*

The aforementioned coin is a rare and beautiful object which had pride of place in my late father's renowned collection of Roman and Ptolemaic coins, now

dispersed according to his wishes. His four daughters have all been mindful of his request that, having had such an interesting time (at a period when such things were possible) collecting these exceptional coins, they should be dispersed for the benefit of others.

My beloved husband and I committed my own share of the proceeds of two prestigious sales (which took place at Christie's in 1984 and 1985) to the founding of a small independent museum which would house my own not inconsiderable collection of fans (the first museum of its kind in the world).

The Cleopatra tetradrachm, being one of Victor Adda's most treasured possessions, it was imperative I should acquire it as a 'cornerstone' to the Museum which is, in a way, a monument to my parents, whose legacy of philanthropy goes back to earlier generations. 'Collectivitis' being in the blood, I have, over the years made The Fan Museum's collection of fans and fan related material unique so that the legacy of the Victor Adda Foundation (a charitable trust) may continue to flourish in years to come. I, therefore, purchased the famous coin and donated it to The Fan Museum as a symbol of its unique identity.

Apart from learning more about the life and times of 'Cleopatra the Great', I have sought to see her through the eyes of artists throughout the centuries and quite naturally (for me) to find representations of her on fans.

Fan painters frequently used prints of paintings by earlier artists as models for fan leaves. Sometimes (though not always) it is possible for us today to identify the painting from which the fan *leaf* derives. But paintings have been lost or destroyed over the centuries and also a fan painter, in order to suit the shape of a fan *leaf*, might use different elements from a number of different paintings.



*The Fan Museum, Hélène Alexander Collection 1566 (obverse)*

In date order, the first 'Cleopatra' fan in the Hélène Alexander Collection (HA 1566) dates from c. 1730-40. It is a fine ivory fan, the *sticks* and *guards* carved and painted with masks and shell shapes in the *guards*. The double *leaf* is painted on both sides, the obverse depicting the often-repeated scene of 'Cleopatra's Banquet'. The story goes that the Egyptian queen gave a banquet in honour of the great Roman general, Mark Antony. On this occasion, Cleopatra is said to have dissolved her priceless pearl earrings in a goblet of wine (which she then proceeded to drink) in order to show her disdain of great riches. Of course, the story is quite unlikely as pearls do not, in fact, dissolve in wine (or even in vinegar).

The scene on the fan is set on a balustraded balcony. Cleopatra is seated on an elaborate *baroque* throne at a table occupied by two men, a turbaned man at the back (her secretary Enobarbus?) and the other man who sits in front of her wearing armour (Antony). Gold plate is displayed on a dresser in the background. This is a curious arrangement as the dresser appears to be in front of the balustrade and positioned as it is, would logically have fallen off the balustrade. The fan painter was clearly copying the design from a print or picture that he did not wholly understand. Attendants

with dishes go to and fro while another man in armour, a dog sitting at his side, observes the scene. The two figures act as '*repoussoir*' figures, leading the eye of the beholder onto the main scene, thus also balancing the composition.

Cleopatra, who delicately holds the pearl between two fingers, is about to drop it into a golden goblet in which one can just distinguish another pearl. Clearly she is trying to impress the man who sits opposite her (no doubt that this is Antony), his helmet adorned with the 'panache' of red feathers that distinguished top officers of the Roman legions.

The reverse of this fan leaf is painted with a curious scene of a fountain and trees, in which a woman sitting side-saddle on a horse raises a hand on which a bird perches. If it is meant to be a hawk, it certainly does not look like one!!

It is difficult to attribute this fan to a particular country though both the *monture* and the *leaf* suggest Italy. However, it should be remembered that many Dutch artists were working and studying in Italy in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and that the composition of the *leaf* derives from elements in early Italian paintings.



HA1566, detail showing Cleopatra and Mark Antony.



HA1566, reverse



*The Fan Museum, Hélène Alexander Collection 2129 (obverse)*

Moving on in time, the following fan (HA 2129) dates from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. This *Rococo* fan also shows the scene of Cleopatra's banquet. The ivory *sticks* and *guards* are carved, pierced and painted with floral motifs and gambolling cherubs. The double paper *leaf* is painted on both sides.

On the obverse, the queen is seated in a 'stage' *fauteuil* (not unlike the *baroque* throne on the previous described fan – HA 1566). The table at which she sits is set with

gold plate. Cleopatra is in the act of dropping her earring into a goblet while a turbaned man, seated at the back, recoils in amazement. Opposite Cleopatra is another seated man who wears a crown. A discarded sword, shield and plumed helmet lie at his feet and he gazes at the beautiful woman before him in wonder. The artist probably confused Caesar and Antony, both Cleopatra's lovers, and in history both fathers of her children. Just beyond the main scene, in the foreground, a

woman displays an open casket with a pearl necklace inside and the whole scene takes place on a raised, tiled platform up three steps (rather reminiscent of a three-tiered wedding cake!!!) On either side, at the foot of the platform, are two male figures who act as '*repoussoir*' figures. Both are seated, a helmeted warrior on one side and a turbaned man on the other (Rome and the Orient?)

For this fan, the composition of the Cleopatra story derives from the same source as the first fan described in this essay, although on this fan the scene takes place on a raised platform which could indicate that, at this period in time, there may have been a play or opera about Cleopatra.

On the reverse of the fan, the painting features the god Apollo (accompanied by two of his muses) about to join a lady, half-reclining on a couch.

*The Fan Museum, Hélène Alexander Collection 2129 (reverse)*





The Fan Museum, Hélène Alexander Collection 2002 (obverse)

Dating from approximately the same time (c. 1750), the next fan (HA 2002) is spectacular in both *leaf* and *monture*. In pure *rococo* style, the magnificent *guards* are deeply carved and highlighted in two tones of gold leaf. The *sticks*, which very slightly overlap, are placed in such a way as to form three ‘*cartouches*’ within gold *rococo* ‘frames’ with garlands of flowers, carved figures of *putti* (and others) backed with *burgo*.

This time the *leaf* depicts the death of Cleopatra, another much represented theme in the story of the fabled queen. A fair, Junoesque Cleopatra on a throne similar to that on both fans I have previously described, occupies centre stage. Around one of her arms is an entwined serpent while Cleopatra clasps its neck and head to her bosom. On a table

beside her is a basket of fruit in which (according to legend) it is said that the serpent was brought to her. Two female figures can be seen in the background, which again tallies with the legend, and who **Shakespeare**, in his play ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ describes as Cleopatra’s attendants, Iras and Charmian.

In the front of the composition are two ‘*repoussoir*’ figures, one of them a concerned looking turbaned man and the other a seated helmeted Roman soldier. In typical *rococo* style, the *reserves* are each different though the floral decoration and shapes of the framing are similar. Featured on the left (in the *reserve*) is a very French rural scene of a gentleman fishing, with two fashionable ladies beside him, one of them resting, fishing rod in hand, beneath a tree. The right

hand *reserve* **Image 9. HA2002**, *reserve detail* is divided into two ‘*cartels*’ by the surrounding lines of the *rococo* borders, within which are two different *chinoiserie* scenes. The reverse is painted with rural landscapes within floral surrounds.

These two mid-18<sup>th</sup> century fans have elements in common. Indeed, Cleopatra’s ‘throne’ is very similar on all *three* fans described up to this point and on both the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century fans, a table at Cleopatra’s side has identical legs! Also, there is a similarity between the ‘*repoussoir*’ figures on both fans. However, the only opera I can find in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that has some relevance is the one entitled *Giulio Cesare*, written by **G. F. Handel** in 1724, and this deals with another story from the life of Cleopatra which will be related below.

See overleaf for *monture* and reverse detail »



*HA2002, monture detail*



*HA2002, reserve detail*



*Caesar returning the crown of Egypt to Cleopatra,  
Pietro da Cortona, c. 1637;  
Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon, France.*

The next two fan leaves (HA 2035 and HA 2036) are both copies of a painting by **Pietro da Cortona** (1596-1669), the subject being Caesar returning the crown of Egypt to Cleopatra.

The first one (HA 2035) is an English fan (c. 1780, length 25.5 cm). The ivory *monture* is carved, pierced and gilt with a central medallion with three delicately carved figures. The *leaf* is mounted *à l'Anglaise* and is painted on both sides.

On the obverse, occupying most of the space in the centre is a 'copy' of Pietro da Cortona's painting in reverse (the fan painter was clearly working from a print). To some extent, the colours on the fan are similar to those in the original painting – Cleopatra's blue cloak, Caesar's red one – but the landscape is an open romantic extension with an apologetic half column at either side of the painted frame and two somewhat incongruous ships in the *reserves*. These *reserves*, with borders of *chinoiserie* flowers and further borders are painted by a different hand to the main picture, but possibly by the same painter who decorated the reverse.



*The Fan Museum, Hélène Alexander Collection  
2035 (obverse)*





*The Fan Museum, Hélène Alexander Collection 2036 (obverse)*

The following fan (HA 2036, length 17 cm) is totally different while once again it treats the same subject by Pietro da Cortona and once again the picture is reversed from the famous painting. This time, however, the subject occupies the whole of the *leaf* and is bordered with gold 'shapes' highlighted with tiny dots of mother of pearl.

The *monture* of this fan (c. 1810) consists of gold chased enamelled *guards* and short pierced mother of pearl *sticks*. On the *leaf*, Cleopatra wears a red cloak and her sister, Berenice, looks positively welcoming whereas in the painting by da Cortona, *and* on HA 2035, she lurks in a positive huff! In the true story, Cleopatra will have her put to death once she (Cleopatra) is firmly settled on the throne of Egypt by Caesar.

This is a beautiful little French 'Empire' type fan, and it is fascinating that this somewhat obscure episode in the story of Cleopatra, unlike the 'Feast of Cleopatra' and the 'Death of Cleopatra' is depicted on two fans within a relatively short time whereas the more popular or well-known stories are repeated *ad infinitum* in paintings over centuries.

Here, on the obverse, a man crowned with a laurel wreath (Julius Caesar) leads Cleopatra to a throne on

which is a golden crown. A gentle looking Cleopatra is accompanied by a female attendant while a cross looking Berenice departs in high dudgeon. This representation from the painting by Pietro da Cortona, c. 1637, now in Lyon, is fictitious since, as we have seen, the reality is that Berenice was conveniently assassinated for political expediency. Pietro da Cortona's painting of this scene shows a beautiful fair young woman as Cleopatra – she was more likely dark haired. The painting on the fan is in reverse to the original so we can safely say it derives from a print and could indicate that the fan painter was also familiar with the original painting as he could hardly be expected to have seen it on the computer!?

The following fan (HA 1152) is a later rendering of 'Cleopatra's Banquet' (*Festin de Cléopâtre*) dating from the late 1860s. The obverse of the fan *leaf* is signed **H. Viger** and is more irreverently entitled by me as 'Cleopatra's Picnic'! On a terrace with steps leading down to the Nile where a curtained barge awaits, an attendant carrying a pitcher ascends the steps, leading the eye to the central scene which is taking place beneath a striped awning. Antony and Cleopatra recline (Roman fashion) on twin divans separated by a table upon which are set golden vessels, while behind them attendants provide cool air, dancing, food and music. Cleopatra gazes amorously at her lover while she





*The Fan Museum, Hélène Alexander Collection 1152 (obverse)*

is about to drop a tear-shaped pearl into her golden goblet. Palm trees sway in the breeze and an early sunset illuminates the background while the spread wings of Horus and gold motifs fill the *reserves*. The reverse is painted with an elegant border dotted with stylised lotus flowers.

This fan is beautifully composed and painted, but the mother of pearl *monture* is exceptional! The *guards* are quite literally sculpted with ‘ancient Egyptian’ male figures, including one on the inside of the left hand *guard*. The type of *monture* is known as having a ‘*contre panache*’, i.e. an extra guard on one side which would allow the fan to be displayed in a case.

Every space of the *monture* is decorated (lotus flowers predominate). The *sticks* are carved and gilded at the top of the *gorge* with a fine border of plants, winged sphinxes and gods in gold. Beneath this frieze, the scene of Cleopatra’s death can be seen, flanked on either side by two *sticks*, one with hieroglyphics and the other with similar figures to those on the *guards*. The scene unfolds before a terrace, beyond which swaying palm trees are etched into the mother of pearl.

On the next ten *sticks* (14 in all), carved in relief, are Cleopatra on her deathbed with one of two attendants about to expire, while the other has already collapsed

beside the couch on which the queen dies, one arm hanging limply over the drapery. A finger of the hand points to the tiled floor where a minute serpent can just be distinguished slithering away. Sumptuous furniture and other details are highlighted in gold and the reverse of the *sticks* is lightly etched in ink with the design on the obverse.

I have searched in vain for a signature on this *monture*. The fan is certainly not too early for a signature by a ‘*maître tabletier*’ but the only signature is that on the leaf of the fan. It is that of **Viger-Duvigneau, Hector Jean Louis** (1819-79). Viger-Duvigneau is known to have painted miniatures and fans at the start of his career but painted this one as a special commission for M. Chardin (successor, maison Vanier) specifically for the 1867 Paris *Exposition Universelle*. Correspondence dated November 1866 reveals the artist received the sum of 500 francs for the commission. The fan was exhibited again in 1870 at the South Kensington Museum’s Loan Exhibition of Fans, Cat. No. 310, p.42 (cf. research, Moss/Schiavone).

It was sold to me in a box stamped on the inside lid as follows: ‘Paris Duvelleroy Paris’ and ‘London, 167 Regent Street’ (the last is in a different font). With it was a handwritten letter from J. Duvelleroy Ltd., 121 New Bond Street, London W1 and dated



HA1152, reverse guard/detail of leaf

16<sup>th</sup> December 1955. The letter reads as follows: *This fan formed part of a South of France collection and was purchased by us about 1925. The fan was made about 1875. Signed J. Duvelleroy.*

My own analysis of this fan differs somewhat from the letter from Duvelleroy in London. Had the letter come from the Paris Duvelleroy, that would have been another question. Clearly the fan was specially commissioned at the time of the opening of the Suez Canal.

The Suez Canal was built by **Ferdinand de Lesseps** in the 1860s. The Empress of the French, the beautiful Eugenie attended many of the special opening ceremonies in 1869. Some (most) of the great bankers of the time were, of course, involved in this project and the Cattaoui Bankers in Cairo actually built a palatial residence in which to receive the Empress.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a revival of interest in Ancient Egypt, especially in the 1920s at the time



HA1152, gorge detail

of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun by **Howard Carter** for **Lord Carnarvon**. For many years before, visitors from Europe had been coming to Egypt to escape the cold winters. Now they flocked to Upper Egypt to visit the Valley of the Kings and beyond, and the Winter Palace at Luxor, as well as the Cataract Hotel in Aswan, experienced a period of unprecedented prosperity. It was, of course, customary to travel from Europe to Egypt by ship (no ‘jets’ in

those days) and visitors would dock in Alexandria, the city of the Ptolemies – the place where Cleopatra had lived and is said to have died. Alexandria was, in those days, a thriving cosmopolitan city. Egyptomania was the fashion of the day – *haute couture* in Paris was inspired as were the jewellers of the day (Cartier, Boucheron, etc.) – all marvelled in the treasures of Egypt, the country of the great Cleopatra. (cf. E M Forster, *Alexandria: a History and Guide*, 1982).



*The Fan Museum, Hélène Alexander Collection 2024 (obverse)*

This fan (HA 2024) features a queen who may (but may not) represent Cleopatra. She is nevertheless unlikely to be Nefertiti or Hatshepsut. Painted in watercolour on thick paper, this leaf shows a reclining queen with attendants and the walls of a building in the background. The fan emanates a 'curious' feeling with its plastic sticks of blue, green, black and red, the mustard coloured guards and the 'contre panache' painted with the outstretched wings of Horus.

Could this have been a project for a more mass-produced fan? And where was it made? It raises many questions, as do the others in this article. Perhaps it is this that makes them so fascinating – indeed makes all fans fascinating: Who did this one belong to? Who owned that one? How? Why? So many hidden secrets, so many questions ..... secret, fantastical, beautiful fans!

**Hélène Alexander Adda, May 2020**



The Fan Museum  
12 Crooms Hill  
Greenwich  
London  
SE10 8ER

Tel: 020 8305 1441  
Fax: 020 8293 1889

[www.thefanmuseum.org.uk](http://www.thefanmuseum.org.uk)