The Madame Heymann Optical Collection – Greatest in History, Disappeared in 1925, then Resurfaced Between 2006 and 2008

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Abstract
Beginning over one hundred years ago the finest collection of optical objects was assembled by Madame Alfred Heymann. Then in 1911, this Parisian woman authored the greatest book on the history of eyeglasses. Subsequently, in 1925, her entire collection totally disappeared from public view. The research effort behind www.antiquespectacles.com located this amazing collection between 2006 and 2008, all in museum storage. Nine institutions around Paris hold some of the best optical artifacts ever created and the majority of the missing collection has now been recovered. Considered the Holy Grail in the world of those who collect optical antiques, this pre-eminent collection included (especially) early fabulous hand-carved wooden eyeglass cases along with their associated original early glasses. The author traveled to Paris in 2010 to work with curators at all these prominent French museums. Additional items from the original renowned collection were successfully recovered.

Introduction
Madame Heymann authored the greatest book on the history of eyeglasses in 1911 and she has become the only female recognized on the Honor Roll of Distinguished Persons which appears on the antiquespectacles.com online museum and encyclopedia. Born Alice Babette Schloss in August 1844, little else is known about Alice’s very early life. After marrying Alfred Heymann in 1865 the couple rented a residence at 20 Avenue de L’Opera but they also owned a fine home in St Cloud just west of Paris. Both sides of the family had fairly substantial assets and Alice’s husband Alfred (Abraham) became a fruit trader. Their friends around Paris, near the end of 19th - beginning of 20th c., were important aristocrats, famous musicians, and well-known writers.

After Alfred passed away in 1897, Alice devoted the vast majority of her time pursuing and collecting fine optical objects. Her searches extended far and wide. She travelled and studied extensively and thus became a truly passionate collector who organized a sizeable number of the most attractive relics she could acquire.
16th century French jeton, Musee de Cluny.

1915 American Encyclopedia of Ophthalmology, the photo that stimulated it all

Items all from the 16th century
She developed studious experience and was therefore able to sniff out at least several hundred uncommon and unusual optical treasures. Madame Heymann strongly believed that the artisan who first created eyeglasses around the year 1286 was just as important as Christopher Columbus!! In addition, she considered many of her best eyeglasses cases from the 16th to 18th century to be little masterpieces. Her collection also included a large group of ornate spyglasses, optical fans, tobacco containers, optical charms, scissors-glasses, monocles, perfume flasks, and all sorts of other assorted unusual objects. She even gathered some incredibly rare non-optical collectibles.

Heymann knew that viewing tubes without lenses had been used as early as the year 1000. Once high quality optical lenses were added to these tubes in the early 17th century in order to create the telescope, she looked upon that as an admirable invention. During her later years Heymann located some of the most fantastic spyglasses (little telescopes) in existence and some of these were later given to the Musée du Louvre and Musée des Arts Décoratifs following her death in 1925.

Around the turn of the 20th century some wonderful Heymann objects were exhibited associated at the Carnavalet Museum in Paris. Her nicest optical objects were in the exhibition of Les Lorgnettes, part of the much larger 1900 Universal and International Exhibition of Paris. Only four copies of the rare 1900 brochures are currently known to exist.

The Book – *Lunettes et Lorgnettes de Jadis*

Madame Alfred Heymann continued to hunt down and acquire relics and finally around 1911 a large group of wonderful objects became part of an exhibition again associated with the Carnavalet Museum while some of her best spyglass lorgnettes were exhibited at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. That same year she published *Lunettes et Lorgnettes de Jadis*, [Paris, J. Leroy]. This rare book was based mostly on her own collection. Her major goal was to please anyone who was attracted to historical objects of the past. Only 300 copies were printed and just over 50 examples have been located to date. Books with their original slipcover are especially scarce.

An exhibition was also held at the Musée de Cluny, officially known as Musée National du Moyen Âge. At the same time, Musee des arts Decoratifs had two windows filled with little collectibles, 18th and 19th century lorgnette spyglasses from the collection. These events all occurred together with the publishing of the book around 1911-12.

Copy #114 of the book deserves high respect. Its existence only became known in October 2010 during an appointment to meet Heymann’s great grandson Roland Hesse. He possesses the only copy that was handed down in the family. With its original slipcover and in excellent condition, it was a great experience to hold this treasure.
Cut steel, largest known group, Carnavalet

Second earliest dated case known, dated 1580

Decorated with cherubs, gilded ornate, 18th century
The book is a well-written survey on the history of eyewear, though it is presented entirely in French. There are about 155 pages in all with 25 plates of which four are full-page color gravures. There are over 200 additional smaller illustrations. More than half of these illustrations are pictures of paintings and prints rather than actual optical aids. Most of these pictures are ascribed to a particular museum or other site. The photos were apparently well-selected because Madame Heymann wanted them to be instructive for anyone who handled the book.

In conclusion, Heymann’s book made her collection famous while at the same time the collection now makes her book famous too. The review and evaluation of all the pages initiated leads to several other collections since not everything illustrated is from the Heymann Collection. Rare and unusual objects from other museums have also led to the discovery of artwork and objects which have been of interest to this research and the resulting educational antiquespectacles website.

One significant example can be presented. Near the top of page 29 Heymann, in French, describes what she believed to be the greatest optical object ever. Part of the Felix Doistau Collection, it was on loan to the Musée du Louvre. The two solid gold eyeglasses in a solid gold and enamel case may possibly be the example seen as part of the Rothschild Collection, currently in London at S.J. Phillips. No other solid gold glasses in a gold and enamel case are known to exist in any other collection from all this research, so far.

The Heymann book continues to serve as a valuable resource for www.antiquespectacles.com. Mrs. Heymann deserves our sincerest thanks and credit for providing images and information about other historic optical objects, thus helping to further expand everyone’s general base of knowledge.
For two pairs, Virgin Mary and Jesus on the reverse, 16th century

Madame Heymann’s book
Imagine opening a drawer and finding these

Instruments of the Passion and the Last Supper, 19th century

Ivory, with book of sundials, one of two known
The Collection

Ophthalmologist Dr. Charles Letocha has studied optical history for several decades and he has helped with many areas of the website. His research found a 1960s German journal which listed countries with the locations of some significant optical collections. Charles shared that list with the author in 2006 and several new names appeared. Specifically for “Frankreich” (France) there were two leads to pursue with this research. So the Musée des Arts Décoratifs was contacted and soon afterwards the Musée Carnavalet. This eventually led to the location of the Madame Heymann’s 1924 will. The details of the story and the detective work are available on www.antiquespectacles.com. Over time objects have been found and now examined in storage at the following institutions:

A. Chateau in Ecouen (Musée National de la Renaissance). About 150 of the finest eye boxes and their associated glasses, 16th – early 19th century. These used to reside in the Musée de Cluny so in inventory they started as Cl. 210xx but then became E. Cl. 210xx.
B. Musée des Arts Décoratifs. About 75 objects, mostly ornate spyglasses.
C. Musée Carnavalet. Over 60 objects including about thirty single lens relics.
D. Musée de Cluny. Only one object is present, however, it is a world class 16th century jeton. This is where the major portion of the collection actually began its journey soon after Heymann’s death in 1925.
E. Musée des arts asiatiques Guimet. Two wonderfully carved Chinese cases with their original eyeglasses.
F. Château de Malmaison in Rueil-Malmaison. One spyglass and one optical fan, both associated with Napoleon.
G. Musée de ‘opéra. A fan, a pair of scissors-glasses and a spyglass, all with important provenance.
H. Musee du Louvre. Eleven objects, all amazing spyglasses.
I. Musée du Conservatoire de Musique - this museum has nothing optical but they received Heymann’s four Guimbards (Jew’s Harp) from the 17th century with their cases of sculpted wood, one of the cases is in iron.
J. Museo dell'Occhiale in Pieve di Cadore, Italy. About ten very nice objects are now here.

The actual eyeglass cases themselves, each and every one, represent incredible works of craftsmanship. Some of the relics are truly spectacular. These objects are so rare and artistic they stand out and deserve everyone’s appreciation. Several of the best are religious in nature, both front and back. Madame Heymann believed these particular cases may have originally belonged to the high clergy because the cases depict scenes from the life of Christ.
MOP quizzing glass, Musee Carnavalet

Optical charms, Museo dell’Occhiale
After the Discovery

News regarding the discovery of many of the missing Heymann objects has already started to spread. Advanced collectors worldwide amaze at the sight of these historic relics, known previously only in the underappreciated 1911 book. Many do not even appear in the book and were therefore totally unknown previously.

These antiques deserve to be considered amongst the most outstanding optical treasures in existence….the BEST of the BEST. Imagine what Madame Heymann must have felt as she held each one in her own hands perhaps 100 years ago.

Small portions of the Heymann Collection still appear to be missing. Some of the unusual spyglasses (lorgnettes) seen on the colored plates in her book have not yet been located. Hopefully these are in storage at one of the smaller museums in the vicinity of Paris. Where are the nearly three dozen fans that were mentioned in the 1900 exhibition catalogue? Two are located at Musée des Arts Décoratifs and one appears in storage at the Château de Malmaison, and one other with provenance is at the Musée de l'opéra. One surfaced by chance in the Vanlathem Collection. Where are the rest?

Where are all the nearly dozen tobacco containers with optical devices? The Musee Du Tabac D'Interet National (Tobacco Museum) in south in Bergerac, France has none of the missing tobacco containers. Where are the best magnifiers, the ones from her book and also several which appear in the photo from the 1915 Encyclopedia? One from the 17th century has a horn frame and also its original case, essentially unique as a combination. Heymann proudly owned about fifty optical charms and yet only a few have been seen in the Art Decoratifs storage area. Where are all the rest? There were ten perfume flasks and nearly all are missing. In addition, she describes seven “primitive” binoculars (given dates 1826 – 1838). What happened to them?

What else was in her collection that does not even appear in her book? We may never know the answer to this key question. But it is fun to wonder and speculate and hope. Leads should arise in the future and then further research may provide additional answers to all these questions.
Religious carvings, 17th century

Tobacco container with spyglass, Musee Carnavalet
Summary

Madame Alfred Heymann was an advanced French collector from the late 19th and early 20th century who devoted much time to enriching her optical collection. She remained devoted to all the available scientific and historic knowledge of the time. Missing since 1925, much of her collection has now been uncovered in storage at a group of famous museums mostly around Paris. By far, this is the #1 optical collection in history.

To have been partially instrumental in the discovery of the Madame Heymann Optical Collection was one of the most exciting experiences of the author’s life. Optical lens research remains fascinating and the author has received the kind assistance of a wonderful group of individuals (collectors/historians/curators) worldwide. This has been a team effort. Everyone’s combined time and energy has been rewarded and hopefully it will lead to further discoveries and an ever-increasing recognition of this amazing Heymann collection (and perhaps others) in museums around Paris.
Perhaps an attractive coffee-table book will be created and published in the future in order to further spread the information and images of these incredibly historic specimens. Someone may eventually translate the original 1911 book from French into English so more people around the world can enjoy everything included in those wonderful pages. The book likely featured Heymann’s best objects but one significant question remains. How large was her entire collection at its maximum?

Finally, these objects have the potential to be gathered together for a public display and exhibition. Will an interested public ever be granted the opportunity to see and appreciate all of these treasured objects? Will the prominent museums of Paris ever try to organize and assemble something for the public to see? I hope so.

The Heymann Collection could be featured along with great antique optical objects from other famous collections. Certainly optical collections are underappreciated and some of the most important objects seem lost to history. A great exhibition organized at a major French museum in or near Paris would be well-attended. These objects deserve the highest level of recognition and visitors from around the world would benefit from the sight and knowledge of the fabulous Madame Heymann Optical Collection.

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