

Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha  
as Collector, Educator and  
Cultural Transferant

By

Jana Riedel



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# Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha as Collector, Educator and Cultural Transferant

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Jana Riedel



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May 2023

*Jana Riedel*





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## **Abbreviations**

RA	Royal Archives Windsor
RC	Royal Commission
RSA	The Society of the Arts (The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce)
StACo	Staatsarchiv Coburg

## Introduction

London's Hyde Park is the location of an eye-catching monument. Standing 176 feet<sup>1</sup> tall, it was unveiled by Queen Victoria in 1872 in memory of her late husband, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, who had died eleven years previously. Of all the memorials erected for Prince Albert this is the grandest and most elaborate. Even the official '1851 Exhibition Memorial' standing just a few yards away, behind the Royal Albert Hall, is humble compared to the centrepiece right opposite the great London concert hall. Designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott (1811–1878), and executed by a number of architects and sculptors, the project took ten years to complete. Itself an impressive and complex work of art, it seeks to present the Victorian conception of who Albert was. It celebrates the Prince as a man who was interested and knowledgeable in all the arts, crafts and sciences, history and politics, and touches on his virtues as an individual, a husband, father and Prince Consort.

In the Gothic Revival style, the monument's main feature is a Gothic ciborium that has at its centre the seated figure of Prince Albert, a gilt bronze statue that was placed under the canopy three years after the inauguration of the memorial, in 1875. Directly beneath the seated statue is an elaborate relief, the *Frieze of Parnassus*, which depicts 169 individual architects, sculptors, composers, artists and poets from history, carved by Henry Hugh Armstead (1828–1905) and John Birnie Philip (1824–1875) under Scott's instruction. The frieze was named after the Mount of Parnassus, a mountain of limestone in central Greece. According to Greek mythology, the mountain was sacred to Dionysus and the Dionysian mysteries. It was also the home to the Muses who were the inspirational goddesses of literature, science, and the arts, and holy to Apollo, the god of music, poetry, arts, oracles, archery, herds and flocks, diseases, healing, light, sun and knowledge. John Philip carved the figures for the west and north sides of the monument which show the sculptors and architects, and Henry Armstead those on the south and east side which show the painters, musicians and poets. The figures are life-size full-length sculptures and a mix of low-relief and high-relief. The frieze was intended to be the 'soul' of the memorial and was inspired by Paul Delaroche's (1797–1856) *Hémicycle des Beaux Arts*,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 176 feet = 54m.

<sup>2</sup> For all of the above, see: Historic England, 'Prince Consort National Memorial (Albert Memorial)', <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1217741> [accessed 2 February 2019]; 'Albert Memorial: The memorial.' Survey of London: Volume 38, South Kensington Museums Area, ed. by F. H. W. Sheppard (London 1975), pp.159–176. Accessible at: British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol38/pp159-176> [accessed 2 February 2019].

a twenty-seven metre-long mural that was one of the most famous works of art in France. The mural depicts painters, architects, sculptors and engravers whom Delaroche and his contemporaries considered to be the greatest in history.<sup>3</sup>

The *Frieze of Parnassus* on the base is just one element of the Albert Memorial. Each corner of the central area at the ciborium has a group of sculptures that represent one of the four areas of Victorian industrial arts and science: agriculture, commerce, engineering and manufacturing. There are also four groups of sculptures at each corner of the outer area. They symbolise the four continents by representation of several ethnographic figures and a large animal: Africa (camel), Americas (bison), Asia (elephant) and Europe (bull).<sup>4</sup> The canopy's external mosaic features a central allegorical figure representing the four arts: poetry with King David and Homer at its side, painting with Apelles and Raphael, architecture with Solomon and Ictinus, and sculpture with Phidias and Michelangelo. The pillars and niches of the canopy bear eight statues symbolising the practical arts and sciences. Astronomy, Geology, Chemistry and Geometry are represented on the four pillars, while Rhetoric, Medicine, Philosophy and Physiology are located in the four niches. The moral and Christian virtues are represented by eight statues near the top of the canopy's tower. There are representations of the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity, and the four cardinal virtues: justice, prudence, courage and temperance with humility annexed to the virtue of temperance. Above these virtues are a group of four gilded angels that raise their arms towards heaven. The monument is then crowned by a golden cross located at the very top of the tower.<sup>5</sup>

Albert himself is holding the catalogue of the Great Exhibition of 1851 in his left hand while the right arm rests on his leg. He looks south towards the Royal Albert Hall and South Kensington, signifying the legacy of the Great Exhibition, which is the South Kensington Museums complex, or *Albertopolis* as it was to be known. Both in his native Coburg, in Germany, where the Prince is featured standing proud and tall in the middle of the main town square, and in the relief above the entrance of the Victoria and Albert Museum<sup>6</sup> in South Kensington, Albert is holding the plans for the Great Exhibition. In all three memorials, then, there is a close connection between Prince Albert and the Great Exhibition of 1851.

At the time, the Great Exhibition of 1851 sought to give a snapshot of the world. This was showcased in its exhibition building and represented by the many exhibitors from around the world and the thousands of objects exhibited. Like a microcosm exemplifying something bigger, the Great Exhibition of 1851 also

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Marsden, *Victoria & Albert: Art & Love* (London 2010), p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Where appropriate, the Victoria and Albert Museum is referred to as the 'V&A'.



Fig. 1: The Albert Memorial, Hyde Park, South Kensington, London.<sup>7</sup>

represented Albert's own development in some way. With his knowledge, influences and experiences from his childhood and youth in the small duchies of Coburg and Gotha, he developed ambitions for commerce, science, manufacturing processes and the arts at the Great Exhibition on a global scale. Therefore, this study explores how Prince Albert's educational development influenced his vision for the Great Exhibition of 1851, how he helped to design it and facilitated the organisation of the Exhibition. In this context, the following research questions will be given particular attention: Did Prince Albert's working and collecting practices, developed prior to his arrival in Britain, relate to the practices adopted for the Exhibition? If so, how were they shaped and modified by the discussions in the run-up to the Great

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<sup>7</sup> Image taken by the author.