

FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN 1951



EXHIBITION
OF PICTURES

FROM SHROPSHIRE HOUSES

JULY 18th — SEPTEMBER 8th



SHREWSBURY ART GALLERY

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INTRODUCTION

FOR THE MOST PART the pictures in this exhibition come from collections, which have been built up during the last three centuries and have acquired a special interest through their long association with the houses in which they still hang. They show the taste and discrimination of Shropshire collectors and give some indication of the riches of the English country houses, which, before the advent of museums, were the chief and proper repositories of works of art in this country.

As one would expect, there is a large number of portraits, ranging from the Elizabethan lawyer (no. 44) from Plowden to the *Family Group* by Sir John Lavery from Oakly Park (no. 20). The names of Lely and Kneller have become almost generic terms for Restoration and late seventeenth century portraits in country houses, and it is only in recent years that scholars have distinguished the work of these masters from that of their less famous contemporaries. It is, therefore, of interest to have in the exhibition not only the fine authentic Peter Lely of *Moll Davis* (no. 28) but also a signed portrait of *Major Richard Salwey* by Gerard Soest (no. 41), much of whose work has been confused with that of Lely. The portrait by Joseph Michael Wright from Weston (no. 48) shows that English portrait painting in the seventeenth century was by no means negligible, although it was overshadowed by the work of foreigners.

The great age of British portrait painting in the eighteenth century is represented by characteristic examples of the work of Reynolds and Gainsborough, superficially alike and yet so different in the handling of paint. The Romney of *Lord Kenyon* (no. 39), with its brilliant painting of the robes of the Lord Chancellor, links the earlier portraits of the eighteenth century with the more romantic phase ushered in by Sir Thomas Lawrence during the early nineteenth century. An excellent example of Lawrence's work is the unfinished head of *The Hon. Robert Clive* (no. 21). The small portraits by Lord Leighton, possibly painted at Loton Park, bring us to the more prosaic mid-nineteenth century, and are charming examples of the work of an artist whose later productions were often pompous and dull.

A special feature of the exhibition is a collection of water-colours by Peter de Wint and Thomas Hearne from Oakly Park and Downton Castle. De Wint often stayed at Oakly, and in Mrs. de Wint's memoir of her husband she wrote "he had known Lady Harriet Clive from her earliest youth and for her he never ceased to feel the highest esteem and regard." De Wint exhibited a number of water-colours of Shropshire at the Old Watercolour Society between 1830 and 1850, including studies of trees at Oakly Park. In Shropshire De Wint also worked for Lord Powis and for Mr. Cheney of Badger.

The drawings by Thomas Hearne at Downton are signed and dated 1784, 1785 and 1786; they are all views of the Teme, which flows through the Park below the Castle, and many of the trees can still be identified. Richard Payne Knight, the celebrated virtuoso and connoisseur, built Downton on a magnificent site overlooking the river and planned in its castellated architecture to give expression to the current taste for "Gothic." But his knowledge and love of ancient art impelled him to design the

interior on classical lines. Payne Knight patronised many of the artists of his day and seems to have had a special liking for Richard Westall, many of whose pictures hang at Downton. He left to the British Museum his collection of English drawings.

Outstanding amongst the works of the Continental schools is the *Man With a Knife* by Rembrandt (no. 36) from Downton, a haunting psychological study painted in the last sad years of the artist's life. Dutch genre pictures of fine quality, and a beautiful seapiece by Van de Capelle (no. 4) come from Shavington. They were bought in the nineteenth century, when English collectors began to interest themselves seriously in Dutch painting, being encouraged no doubt by the example of George IV, who bought so many of the distinguished Dutch pictures now in the Royal Collection. A river scene by Van der Heyden from Netley Park (no. 17) is another good example of Dutch seventeenth century topographical painting. An unusual Canaletto of *Castel St. Angelo in Rome* (no. 3), and a charming French portrait signed *Chardin* (no. 5), both from Shavington, are also of considerable interest.

Although of no great artistic importance the album of sketches made by the father of Major Parker Leighton of Sweeney is a valuable document for art historians, and includes drawings of the portraits which he saw when visiting country houses some eighty years ago. Many of the pictures have since changed hands, but the book is open at a page showing a sketch of the portrait of *Lord Kenyon* (no. 39) in the exhibition.

Perhaps it is too optimistic to hope that if such an exhibition is held a hundred years hence, the organisers will still be able to find such a distinguished and varied collection of pictures from the houses of the county. But this exhibition should be the prelude to many others and show what can be done in the smaller art galleries of England.

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