



THE ART NEWSPAPER

EXHIBITIONS *United Kingdom*

Back home to Houghton

Some of Sir Robert Walpole's magnificent collection returns from the State Hermitage to his former home

OLD MASTERS

King's Lynn. The fifth of 17 children of a wealthy, but not rich, Norfolk landowner and MP Robert Walpole (1676-1745) would not, as a child and youth, have seemed destined for greatness. After Eton, he went up to Cambridge, but his studies were terminated when his father, following the deaths of Walpole's elder brothers, recalled him to learn the business of being a country gent and heir to the estate at Houghton. On his father's death in 1700, he took over his father's seat for Castle Rising and, in 1702, became the Whig MP for King's Lynn.

British politics changed dramatically with the death of Queen Anne in 1714. The Tory ascendancy (the party of King and Church) gave way to the Whigs (the party of constitutional monarchist landowners). George I, seldom in England, speaking little English, concerned more with Hanover and the Reich, presented the Whigs with an opportunity to extend their sway as never before, the so-called Whig Supremacy that was to last until 1760.

Walpole's moment had arrived. He was made First Lord of the Treasury in 1715 and by 1721 the King's First Minister, the position that he expanded and consolidated in the absence of a king who relied almost entirely on Walpole's advice and direction. Overseeing policy and directing the passage of legislation, creating a cabinet that was expected



Houghton Hall, Norfolk: the home for a while of works by Raphael, Rubens, Velázquez and more

unanimously to endorse his leadership, and dispensing highly valuable patronage both secular and ecclesiastical, he effectively created what was later called the office of "prime minister".

He also became very, very rich. The

historian J.H. Plumb estimated that between 1714 and 1717 alone he put £100,000 (at least £18m in today's money) in his pocket, and it did not stop there. In 1722 he had contracted Colen Campbell and William Kent to build a stately home next to the old house at Houghton. It was completed in record time in 1735.

His cupidity was criticised by contemporaries (as in John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera", 1728) as well as subsequent historians (E.P. Thompson called him "a mafioso presiding over a banana republic"). But, as would befit a grandee, he also began to collect works of art on

distress of his uncle, Horace Walpole, and the nation – 204 of the best works to the Tsarina Catherine the Great for £40,555 (around £5.2m in today's money, see box) in 1778-89. These she installed in the Hermitage where 126 remain (36 are missing; 15 are in Moscow, 21 in other Russian museums; six were sold to US museums in the 1920s and 30s).

Now, marking the 250th anniversary of Catherine's accession, the State Hermitage is sending 60 paintings back for display at Houghton Hall, where they will be shown as they were originally in the Grand Rooms (the Sa-

"Walpole effectively created what became the office of prime minister – and became very, very rich"

a large scale and installed them in his three town houses and at Houghton. By 1736 there were more than 60 paintings in Grosvenor Street, nearly 80 in his house in Chelsea, 150 in Downing Street and 113 paintings at Houghton. He retired from parliament in 1742, was created the First Earl of Orford and moved all his collections to Houghton. The collection included works by Raphael, Veronese, Van Dyck, Poussin, Rubens, Maratta, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Murillo, a host of Dutch and Flemish painters and many others.

After his death, his spendthrift heir, the Third Earl, sold – to the disgust and

loon, the Maratta Room, the Embroidered Bed Chamber, the Cabinet Room and the two parlours).

The exhibition is an exercise in improving Russo-UK relations, and its sponsorship by BP celebrates the resolution last October of years of fraught relations with the Russian authorities over its TNK-BP partnership. Other sponsors include Christie's and the Oracle Capital Group, which includes board members with a strong interest in Russia.

Donald Lee
• *Houghton Revisited: Masterpieces from the Hermitage, Houghton Hall, King's Lynn, Norfolk, 17 May-29 September*

Then and now: Houghton sale prices

In his 1961 analysis of the art market, *The Economics of Taste*, Gerald Reitlinger writes a report on the 1779 Houghton Hall sale. Here, he says, the "Empress Catherine of Russia" spent "more than £40,000" (around £5.2m in today's money), on one of only six collections on which she spent a total £150,000 (£21m today) between 1764 and 1779. The valuation of the works (overseen by the artist Benjamin West) is said to have been "In most cases... two or three times as much as the auction-room maximum of the day", with the most expensive purchases being Van Dyck's *Holy Family* and Rubens's *Magdalen Kissing the Feet of Christ*, which cost £1,600 each (around £210,000 today). West was "determined that full-length portraits, painted by the illustrious dead, should not be esteemed higher than modern portrait commissions": Van Dyck's *Portrait of Sir Thomas Wharton, 1639* (right), included in the "Revisited" exhibition, was valued at £200 (£26,000). The record auction price today for a named portrait by Van Dyck is £2m, set at Sotheby's in 2009 for his *Portrait of Endymion Porter, M.G.*



In brief



Skull-cleaning time at the Hunterian Museum, early 20th century

The ancient art of specimen preservation

As Damien Hirst can attest, looking after tanks full of biological specimens is no easy task. The artist's famous pickled shark deteriorated so badly that it had to be replaced in 2006. "Draw your own conclusions about the skills of those involved in that," says Sam Alberti, the director of the Hunterian Museum in London, which this year celebrates 200 years at the forefront of medical education with a show dedicated to its history. "There are very few people with the skills to maintain these collections, but we still have our original specimens from over 200 years ago." Conservation isn't the only worry for the medical museum. "Keeping our collection relevant is a constant challenge," Alberti says. "I know we do the past of surgery very effectively, but we want to make sure we promote its future as well." Whether it is driven by morbid curiosity or anatomical research, with more than 75,000 visitors to the museum in the past year, the appeal of a syphilitic skull in a jar is magnetic. **E.F.**

Syngenta launches photography award

The Swiss-based agrochemicals giant Syngenta, which specialises in pesticide and seed production, has launched the first edition of the Syngenta Photography Award. The theme this year is "urban/rural", and will explore the social and environmental tensions that arise from urban expansion into rural areas.

The finalists were announced in March, and the winners will be revealed on 15 May. There is a \$5,000 first prize in the open competition category, while the winning professional photographer will receive \$15,000 and up to \$25,000 to complete a commission. The finalists' work (including Pablo Lopez Luz's *Terrazo*, above) will be shown at Somerset House, London, from 17-21 May, with works by other entrants. **E.R.**

