



Anthony van Dyck
*Portrait of Sir
Thomas Wharton,*
1639

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OPPOSITE:
Houghton Hall,
exterior view

Courtesy: Houghton Hall

Houghton Revisited



Walpole Masterpieces from the Hermitage

The undisputed star of the exhibition *Houghton Revisited: Walpole Masterpieces from the Hermitage* at Norfolk's historic Houghton Hall is the Palladian house itself. I hesitate to call it a house because it is too grand to be merely a house. With its own deer park, sculpture park, walled garden, vast lawns, 106 rooms, a grand mahogany staircase inside and another decorative staircase outside, it would be easier to call it a castle, but in England, home of the fanciful understatement, it is merely a “great house.”



Houghton Revisited: installation view of the Carlo Maratta Room.

Houghton Hall Photo: John Bodkin.

HOUGHTON HALL was built in the eighteenth century by Sir Robert Walpole, on the site of his father's earlier home, which he deemed unfit to display the art he had assembled while Paymaster-General serving King George I, then First Lord of the Treasury, succeeding to Chancellor of the Exchequer, and finishing with Prime Minister. These were all powerful and exceptionally lucrative positions at a time when influence could be bought and traded. He worked at maintaining stellar relations with the court, including George I's favourite mistress and George II's wife Caroline, managed to profit even from the South Sea Bubble, and excelled at keeping a low profile at his country house whenever blame was dished out in London. He was a fine debater, a capable manager of conflicting interests, and succeeded at staying in favour, while some of his enemies were exiled, and stayed awake during interminable parliamentary debates that few endured without a nap. "Vulgar, coarse and ostentatious he might be, yet his aesthetic judgment remains incomparably good," according to J.H. Plumb's excellent biography.

Not only was he Britain's first but also its longest serving Prime Minister, with 21 years of service under his expanding belt. There is a wonderful painting of him, wearing the blue, gold-trimmed livery of the King's



Carlo Maratta
Pope Clement IX

1669

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“The great house fell into disrepair while ever increasing bands of hangers-on disported themselves in the stately rooms. Whether he was indeed mad or merely eccentric – as our guide, John Maxwell, claimed – he sold 204 of Sir Robert’s finest works for £40,550 to Catherine the Great.”

staghounds, in the Hall’s library. The artist, John Wootton, was obviously not tempted to beautify the image. Sir Robert is portrayed as a rather corpulent, red faced squire, surrounded by adoring dogs. The other painting in the library is Sir Godfrey Kneller’s George I, in elaborate gold frame, above the fireplace. It is, fittingly, bigger than Sir Robert’s portrait. The library itself testifies to an eclectic, educated taste (he had studied at Eton and Cambridge) in classical literature, history, and architecture. What I found as striking were the rich leather

bindings and the carved mahogany ornaments and shelves, all in remarkably good shape.

The lithe bronze gladiator, made in 1645 by Hubert Le Sueur, in the centre of the great mahogany staircase is a fine introduction to the Stone Hall, the first room on the main floor, where the imposing bust of Sir Robert in toga is matched by the elegant bust of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. The Stone Hall is a magnificent example of William Kent’s work. Kent was the chief designer at Houghton. It was Kent who planned the building to house the art, determined the colours in each room and where every piece of furniture – the state beds, the tapestries, the sculptures, the ceiling decorations, even the specially made gilded chairs – was to be placed. While successive family members added to the collection, its inspiration remains Sir Robert Walpole’s and, fortunately, the Hall’s impressive design remains Kent’s.

THE MAIN ATTRACTION this year at Houghton Hall was not the building, nor its illustrious history, but the art collection, reassembled here for the first time since it was sold by Sir Robert’s grandson, George, to Catherine the Great of Russia in 1779. George, the Third Earl of Orford, was often referred to as “mad George,” and piled up more debt than even his illustrious grandfather managed to leave to his heirs. He was, according to Chris Boxall, author of *Bob of Lynn*, “an irresponsible and wild young man” who progressed to “seeming madness” and lost a fortune at gaming tables and racecourses. His famous uncle Horace Walpole – art historian, parliamentarian, and author of the strange Gothic novel *The Castle of*



ABOVE:
Pieter Paul Rubens
Head of a Girl
n.d.
© State Hermitage Museum

FOLLOWING PAGES:
David Teniers
Kitchen
1646
© State Hermitage Museum







Otranto – complained about George’s heavy drinking, womanizing, constant bragging, and his obstinacy – clearly, he was not inclined to listen to advice from Horace. The great house fell into disrepair while ever increasing bands of hangers-on disported themselves in the stately rooms. Whether he was indeed mad or merely eccentric – as our guide, John Maxwell, claimed – he sold 204 of Sir Robert’s finest works for £40,550 to Catherine the Great. She proudly added them to the Hermitage in St Petersburg.



*Houghton Revisited: installation
view of the Common Parlour.*

Houghton Hall Photo: John Bodkin.

The collection contained a fabulous array of works by Velázquez, Poussin, Van Dyck, Murillo, Hals, Rubens, Raphael, and some lesser lights, such as Jordaens and Teniers. In fact some of the most striking paintings are not by the masters. I was particularly struck by David Teniers II's *The Kitchen* because of its very fine detail and the quality of light in the painting. Others have chosen Nicolas Poussin's *The Holy Family with St Elizabeth and John the Baptist* as the most impressive work here, but I found it too static. Anthony van Dyck's portrait of Sir William Chaloner

practically talks to the viewer, as does Velázquez's thoughtful Pope Innocent X in the Common Parlour. In Sir Robert's day, the Common Parlour was the main dining room, used for entertainment by a host who loved to entertain. There had been invitations to the nearby nobility, to a few key rivals, wealthy country squires – after all, Robert Walpole himself was a country squire – and their ladies and, of course, a plethora of royals. It was rumoured that the Prince of Wales, during Walpole's great-grandson's time, refused to spend another night in the gloriously tapestried Green Velvet Bedchamber, the grandest of the guest bedrooms, after he encountered a ghost sharing the room, but that did not discourage him from frequently visiting Houghton Hall.

Sadly, the success in placing the paintings in the exact positions they once occupied has meant that many of them are not well lit, and others suffer from too much reflected light from the windows.

THE CREDIT for borrowing such a large number of paintings from the Hermitage belongs to Thierry Morel. A slight man with boundless energy, he whips around the grand rooms, his hands flying as he tells each piece's story. He is a Rhodes Scholar, an art historian, and a former director of the Hermitage Foundation in the UK. He knew that Sir Robert's was the most important collection the Hermitage had ever acquired from Britain, and once he realized that the house built for the collection was still much as it had been 250 years ago, he was determined to bring the art back to Houghton. The Hall's resident Walpole descendant, The Marquess of Cholmondeley, was enthusiastic. He is proud that except for the pieces sold by George "the contents of Houghton remain remarkably intact." His grandparents restored the interiors, repaired the damaged roofs and stonework. His grandmother, daughter of Edward Sassoon and Aline Rothschild, devoted much of her life and fortune to bringing Houghton back to its early splendour.

"When I wrote the proposal, I suggested only thirteen pieces. They agreed to six," Morel said. But from such meagre beginnings the exhibition grew to encompass eighty paintings, twenty drawings, and several important pieces of silver and furniture. When Morel set about seeking funding for the project, there were still doubts that the Hermitage would allow such a major collection to leave Russia. The fact that they had never done this before did not deter him, nor that insurance for the works was prohibitive. Armed guards travelled with the collection and will accompany it home again.

ANNA PORTER is an author, journalist, and former book publisher. Her most recent book is *The Ghosts of Europe: Journeys through Central Europe's Troubled Past and Uncertain Future* (Douglas & McIntyre). She has recently been writing about Central Europe for *Maclean's* and the *Globe and Mail*.



Rembrandt van Rijn
Portrait of an Elderly Lady
c. 1650

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