

# Homecoming: Artworks Sold Long Ago Visit Their Onetime English Home

BY DAVID MASELLO



Like many a homeowner, David Cholmondeley, a.k.a. the 7th Marquess of Cholmondeley, was cleaning his attic. His attic, however, occupies the top floor of one of England's grandest and most expansive Palladian-style residences, Houghton Hall, completed in 1735 in the eastern county of Norfolk. And instead of coming upon vintage Christmas ornaments and moth-eaten blankets, as most homeowners might, he discovered something far more valuable.

"I was rummaging around up there when I found a painting-on-panel by Andrea del Sarto [1486-1531], or one certainly done by his studio," he says. "It was in very bad condition — it had gone almost black with age. It's still a theory, but it's nice to think that this work showing the Holy Family with a young Saint John the Baptist was one of the original Sir Robert pictures."

His Lordship (whose surname is pronounced "Chumley") is referring to his direct ancestor Sir Robert Walpole (1676-1745), who served as England's first prime minister (1722-42), and who amassed one of the most admired private art collections of the time. After his death, the entire collection was sold to the Russian empress Catherine the Great — a trove of 201 paintings, two pastels, and one drawing that constituted her greatest cultural acquisition. Not since 1779, when that precious cargo of Poussins and Rembrandts, van Dycks and Rubenses (but not that blackened del Sarto) arrived by ship in St. Petersburg, have these masterworks been seen in their former abode.

This summer, however, Houghton Hall, which remains the private home of the Marquess and his young family, will temporarily become a public museum. Many of its rooms will be filled again with more than 60 of the artworks that once hung on the silk-covered walls, along with dozens

Bartolome Esteban Murillo (1617-1682)  
*The Immaculate Conception*  
c. 1680, Oil on canvas, 76 3/4 x 57 in.  
State Hermitage Museum





Salvator Rosa (1615-1673)

***The Prodigal Son***

c. 1650-55, Oil on canvas, 100 x 73 1/4 in.  
State Hermitage Museum

of related drawings and pieces of silver to be gathered for the exhibition *Houghton Revisited: Masterpieces from the State Hermitage Museum at Houghton Hall*.

As curator Thierry Morel says of the show he conceived, one that required the negotiating skills of a seasoned diplomat, “The experience of seeing these paintings in their original context will be like traveling to the moon. Visitors will be seeing something no one thought anyone would see again.” Cholmondeley, whom Morel consulted before approaching the Hermitage’s curators, concurs: “It’s a magical idea and one that no one thought really could happen. What Thierry has accomplished had seemed impossible, but he’s very persuasive.”

Formerly director of the Hermitage Foundation U.K., Morel has maintained a long-standing relationship with the curator of that great museum in St. Petersburg. “The staff and directors at the Hermitage

David Teniers II

***Kitchen***

1646, Oil on canvas, 67 1/4 x 93 1/4 in.  
State Hermitage Museum





A facade of Houghton Hall

were incredibly helpful,” he says. “They have gotten an undeserved reputation for being difficult, but they have been anything but.” Morel’s role in rounding up works for the exhibition extended beyond the Hermitage, however. He says that Russia — desperate for cash during the 1920s and ’30s — sold a few of the ex-Walpole pictures to dealers and institutions around Europe. (Two others were sold to Pittsburgh’s Paul Mellon, who promptly deposited them in his new National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. — Frans Hals’s *Portrait of a Young Man* [c. 1646] and an anonymous artist’s *Pope Innocent X* [c. 1650]). Still other works were dispersed to museums throughout the Soviet Union, notably Moscow’s Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. Moreover, scholars have determined that some 36 ex-Walpole works went missing after World War II and have yet to be traced. “Fortunately, many of the works that Catherine the Great acquired became the nucleus for the Hermitage, which meant that they were well maintained and respected,” says Morel.

#### FAMILY MATTERS

Even though, in its day, Sir Robert’s collection of pictures from Italy, France, Holland, Spain, Germany, and England was decidedly private, the whole of England felt a national pride in it. Its sale to Catherine was therefore kept so secret that even the press did not find out until the deal had been completed.<sup>1</sup> On February 5, 1779, the *Cambridge Chronicle* reported, “We are informed that, much to the dishonour of this country, the celebrated Houghton collection of pictures ... collected at vast expence [sic] by the late Sir Robert Walpole, is actually purchased by the Empress of Russia for 40,000 £.” The public felt particularly wounded by this development because there was much ongoing debate about how to enlarge the British Museum, which had been established only in 1753. It had long been assumed that some works in the Walpole collection would eventually find their way into the museum.

Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641)  
*Sir Thomas Wharton*  
 1639, Oil on canvas, 85 1/2 x 50 1/2 in.  
 State Hermitage Museum



6. Thomas Wharton brother  
 to Philip Henry Lord Wharton  
 1639 about 1/2 top of 2/3



Paris Bordone (1500-1571)  
*Two Women, a Cupid, and a Soldier*  
1550s, Oil on canvas, 42 1/2 x 50 3/4 in.  
State Hermitage Museum

The man responsible for this episode — in some ways equivalent to the relocation of the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles in 1957 — was George Walpole, a grandson of Sir Robert. Excoriated by both the public and his family, his act was seen as a treasonous cultural, and familial, betrayal. “He is the most selfish man in the world, without being the least interested: he loves nobody but himself, yet neglects every view of fortune and ambition,” his uncle Horace Walpole, son of Sir Robert, wrote in a letter. “In short, it is impossible... to esteem him when one thinks of him.”<sup>22</sup>

George Walpole, the 3rd Earl of Orford, had inherited Houghton Hall and its collection. To cover his debts, he negotiated the sale of the latter through Christie’s. In another letter, Uncle Horace wrote, “It is the

most signal mortification to my idolatry for my father’s memory, that it could receive. It is stripping the temple of his glory and his affection. I must never cast a thought toward Norfolk more — nor will hear my nephew’s name, if I can avoid it.”

Morel says, “Horace mourned the loss of the collection. He was an amazing aesthete. He built the great house known as Strawberry Hill [now a museum southwest of London], and he loved art and collecting it. He was so afraid of the works being destroyed in Russia that he hadn’t the heart to go see them ever again.” Ironically, Morel points out, had the artworks remained at Houghton Hall, many would likely have been destroyed by the fire that raged in one of its picture galleries in 1789.

David Cholmondeley seems willing to dismiss, if not forgive, Sir George, his relation of centuries ago. “Everyone is always asking, ‘Don’t you miss those paintings?’ We don’t miss them. We never had them. We’d never seen them.” Cholmondeley does recount a trip he took to the Hermitage some 25 years ago, “during what was still then Communist times.

Houghton's stairhall



My grandmother, from whom I inherited Houghton, often talked about the sale of the works, though. She went to Russia in the 1950s to see some of the paintings. She even learned some Russian prior to her trip — I found her Russian-language exercise book. She became so friendly with the curators there that she even managed to buy back one of the paintings, a portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller.”

Prior to the works being hung at Houghton, many of them adorned Sir Robert's official offices at 10 Downing Street in London. When he was ousted as prime minister, he brought them all back to his home in Norfolk, many rooms of which were already filled with paintings, ancient Roman busts, and tapestries. Indeed, Sir Robert directed his architects, Colen Campbell and James Gibbs, along with William Kent, who designed the interiors and furnishings, to configure a layout that would accommodate an ever-growing collection.

In mounting the new exhibition there, Morel is eager to re-create as carefully as possible the original configuration of artworks within Houghton. Fortunately, “we have documentary evidence from William Kent,” he says. “We have his drawings, and he included some of the works of art in his mock-up drawings for the interiors and the exact spots where he wanted to place the artworks.” In addition, Horace Walpole, who eagerly pursued artworks with his father, completed a catalogue in 1743 entitled *Aedes Walpolianae*, in which each of 276 items carries a brief description, along with its approximate position in a room.

Yet another document has emerged to help Morel and his curatorial team, which includes Nicholas Penny, director of England's National Gallery, and Sue Thompson, a former senior exhibition organizer at London's Royal Academy of Arts. Once again, David Cholmondeley has proved adept at uncovering his family's treasures, quite apart from the blackened del Sarto painting. “When I took over the house from my grandmother in 1990,” he says, “I was opening every cupboard and

drawer — as you do in a new place where you're living. You know how that is? And one of the first things I discovered, way in the back of a drawer of Sir Robert's original desk in the library, were folded-up drawings he had made of the pictures as they had hung in three of the rooms. It was a wonderful discovery. It helped us devise a plan for where some of the paintings would go for this exhibition. It's not such a challenge to re-create the rooms as they exactly were, because some of the crimson velvet fabrics on the walls and the upholstery on the furniture are the same as they have always been.”

Cholmondeley says the reason for the well-preserved interiors is that the house was hardly used, even in Sir Robert's time. “Essentially, Houghton was a time capsule up until the time my grandmother and grandfather moved in after the first World War, in 1918. For all those years when it remained empty of residents, a lot of good housekeepers kept the house dry and the curtains drawn against the sunlight, which would have ruined the fabrics.”

#### IN RESIDENCE

Once the exhibition opens, life at Houghton Hall will likely change considerably for Lord Cholmondeley and his family, which includes his wife — the former Rose Hanbury, a glamorous onetime fashion model — and their twin sons. For years, a few select rooms have been open to the public three days a week, for limited hours. During Morel's show, however, the house will be visitable six days per week for longer hours. “I embraced the idea of this exhibition, but with some reservations,” Cholmondeley admits. “There was the issue of cost — would we find enough sponsors? — but also the issue of how it would change our lives here. We're used to getting about 20,000 visitors per year, but the show is expected to attract upwards of 80,000. It's more than worth it, though. This is not something we'll make any money from, or had any intention



Carlo Maratta (1625-1713)

**Pope Clement IX**

1669, Oil on canvas, 67 x 48 1/2 in.

State Hermitage Museum

and directed a film adaptation of Truman Capote's novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, and also a 2009 feature film, *Shadows in the Sun*. (Next year the BBC will screen a documentary recounting the Walpole exhibition at Houghton Hall, though Cholmondeley is not involved in that project.)

"At the moment," Cholmondeley says, "I am concentrating on this upcoming exhibition — and one or two others. I'm hoping to mount a show of work by James Turrell [the American installation artist born in 1943], which is something very different for us. We have some contemporary installations on the grounds of Houghton. I am interested in contemporary art, and one of my long-term objectives is to have a sculpture park here. I try to add one piece per year. We have a Richard Long slate circle, a work by Xian Wang of scholars' rocks, and a fascinating piece by the Danish artist Jeppe Hein, which incorporates water and fire — a fountain with a lit flame on top, but it's not an eternal flame since we like to save gas. I always believe that it's good to have things that surprise people."

Morel emphasizes, "What's important to remember, too, is that this exhibition would never have happened had Lord Cholmondeley not been very interested in his family's history, the collection, and the legacy of the house. No committee or foundation could replace a family dedicated to protecting and maintaining a house like this. And, as for the experience of the exhibition, it is enhanced dramatically by the fact that the family will be living in the house, upstairs. Houghton Hall is not a clinical museum. It has a very lived-in, intimate feel to it." ■

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**Information:** *The exhibition will be open to the public from May 15 through September 28, 2013. Houghton Hall is located near the town of King's Lynn, Norfolk PE31 6UE, England, tel 44.1485.528569, houghtonhall.com.*

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#### Endnotes

1. Andrew Moore and Larissa Dukelskaya, eds., *A Capital Collection: Houghton Hall and the Hermitage*, London: Yale University Press and Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2002.
2. Ibid.

of doing so, but it's a wonderful opportunity for the house and for getting it better known to the public."

In terms of sponsorship, Morel and members of the steering committee he formed are continuing to seek private and corporate funding. Ironically, one of the first supporters to come on board was Christie's. Morel says, "James Christie, the founder of the auction house in the 18th century, is the one who brokered the sale to Catherine the Great, so we've established another authentic link to the past for this exhibition."

Morel points out how rare it is for the public to see a collection as illustrious as Sir Robert Walpole's outside of a big city. "Most museums are in capital cities, and, therefore, you experience works of this caliber in a different, busier setting. Here, you're in the middle of the Norfolk countryside, and that will make for a more contemplative experience. While looking at these pictures, you can look out the windows and see herds of white deer on the property and in the park."

Lord Cholmondeley is not your stereotypical nobleman, sounding the horn at a fox hunt, though as the Lord Great Chamberlain, he is actually responsible for welcoming the Queen to the opening of Parliament, and even for walking backward in her presence as he does so. His professional name is David Rocksavage (another of his hereditary titles is Earl of Rocksavage), under which he works as a filmmaker. Apart from appearing in a 1987 Eric Rohmer film, *4 Adventures de Reinette et Mirabelle*, he has written

