Royal Academy of Arts

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An American's Passion for British Art
PAUL MELLON'S LEGACY

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An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

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COVER: Cat. 91, (detail), J.M.W. Turner, *Staffa, Fingal's Cave*, 1832. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection. Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

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'Every man wants to connect his life with something he thinks eternal.'
ANDREW W. MELLON

Introduction

'I must study politics and war, that my sons have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.'
JOHN ADAMS, 1780

Paul Mellon (1907–1999) was the son of Nora McMullen, daughter of a Hertfordshire brewer, and Andrew Mellon, an American banker of Scottish and Irish descent, who ranked alongside John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford as one of the wealthiest men in early twentieth-century America. Andrew became a committed art collector who founded the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. His most ambitious acquisition consisted of twenty-one old master paintings from the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg and included works by Jan van Eyck (d. 1441), Sandro Botticelli (*c.* 1445–1510), Raphael (1483–1520) and Titian (*c.* 1487/90–1576).

Paul Mellon became a serious collector in his middle age. Unlike his father, who gravitated towards acknowledged old masterpieces, Paul began to collect a genre of art that had by the twentieth century been largely forgotten. His collecting habits were discriminating and intuitive. He usually purchased artworks with eventual bequests in mind and often bought entire collections in order to save them from dispersal. After initially collecting French nineteenth-century art, he eventually amassed an outstanding collection of British art and literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With it he established the Yale Center for British Art, an American public museum and research institute and the largest collection of British art outside the United Kingdom.

Anglophilia

In his own words, Paul Mellon's love of British art stemmed from his fascination with British life and history. He spent much of his early childhood in England and inherited his mother's love of horses and country life. After his parents' acrimonious and scandalous divorce, Paul lived with his father for a time in the Hyde Park Hotel. His governess would take him to Kensington Gardens, and the sight of suffragettes, soldiers and

nannies tending to children with toy boats created romantic notions and influential memories of pre-First-World-War England that would later inform his art collecting.

Mellon obtained a degree in English Studies from Yale University and later read History at Cambridge, developing an interest in the period spanning the leadership of Robert Walpole (*c.* 1720) to the ascendancy of Queen Victoria in 1837. At Cambridge he also indulged his great sporting loves, rowing, horse-racing and fox-hunting. In 1936 while hunting in the Cotswolds, Mellon met a partner of the Manhattan gallery Knoedler & Company, who told him of an oil painting of a horse available for sale and urged him to call. On doing so, Mellon and his first wife Mary fell in love with *Pumpkin with a Stable-lad* by George Stubbs (1724–1806).

'We were both bowled over by the charming horse, the young boy in a cherry-colored jacket, and the beautiful landscape background.'
PAUL MELLON, 1992

'Nature was and is always superior to art whether Greek or Roman.'
GEORGE STUBBS, 1754

Cat. 25 Stubbs's mastery of painting the horse derived from his comprehensive knowledge of anatomy, which he had studied at York Hospital, drawing dissections and illustrating medical journals. He later transferred his studies to a Lincolnshire farmhouse, where he spent eighteen months manipulating the corpses of horses into lifelike poses. He would slowly skin the animals and draw each progressive layer, working his way down to the skeleton. His subsequent ability to capture horses' individual natures made him enormously popular with the aristocracy, particularly the members of the newly formed Jockey Club.

The centre of this painting bisects the horse Pumpkin and creates two distinct halves to the composition. The left-hand side is open and airy. A hazy line of trees, descending in height, sits on the distant horizon, gracefully inviting the eye from the edge of the lake back towards the centre of the image. Pumpkin's chestnut flanks stand strong and stark against the landscape's soft hues. The right of the image is much more densely populated, both with characters and setting. A solemn little stable boy, intent on his job, stands face to face with Pumpkin, the position of his legs echoing those of the tree trunks behind him and mirroring the stance of Pumpkin's hind legs. Pumpkin's snout cranes forward and reflects the graceful arc of the tree behind it. The treetop fills the foreground, suggesting the shape of the languid clouds to their left and obscuring most of the background. The action of the image exists not only in two distinct hemispheres – the left and the right – but on two separate planes – the fore and backgrounds.

Paul and Mary Mellon bought the painting for $5,000. It was their first painting purchase and although Paul did not buy any

Cat. 25
George Stubbs
Pumpkin with a Stable-lad, 1774
Oil on panel
80 × 99.5 cm
Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

British works again for another twenty-three years, the acquisition of *Pumpkin* was a turning point in his life as a collector. John Baskett, in the exhibition catalogue, suggests that *Pumpkin* was of particular importance to Mellon not just because it was the first English painting he purchased, but because in buying it he for the first time chose a work of his own taste and not that of his father's. In his memoirs, Mellon claimed that this painting remained his favourite piece of British art throughout his life.

Why do you think Stubbs has created two such distinct halves in this image?

What effect does the boy's red jacket have on the painting?

Mellon's love of the English landscape and light – coupled with his interest in English history and his enjoyment of traditional English pastimes such as hunting and racing – would both instigate and inform his decision to collect paintings, drawings, watercolours, books and prints of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English life.

Englishness

English art is unique to and informed by its country of origin, much as the work of Michelangelo (1475–1564) and Raphael is distinctly Italian and Vermeer (1632–1675) patently Dutch. England's people, history, physical terrain and climate have played major parts in creating the character of English art and have produced an emphasis on subject matter which celebrated the observations of man or nature as seen in portraiture and landscape.

As a Protestant country, England had little interest in the religious art commissioned in Europe by the Catholic Church. With their firm faith in the gods of reason and common sense, the English developed a taste not for the ornate and allegorical Baroque style of the continent, but for an art and architecture founded on truth in nature. In eighteenth-century England, wealthy landowners built serene and formal homes in the Palladian style. Their grounds, in contrast, were the polar opposite of the manicured parks of Versailles: English landscaped gardens were informal, a reflection of seventeenth-century French idealised landscape paintings, yet appreciative of the distinct national qualities of the English countryside.

Cat. 35
Thomas Gainsborough
The Gravenor Family, *c.* 1754

Oil on canvas
90.2 × 90.2 cm

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

Cat. 35 Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788) specialised in both portraiture and landscape painting. He was a contemporary and rival of the fashionable society portrait painter Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) (cat. 31), but his aims were very different. He loved painting landscape. The setting of *The Gravenor Family* typifies the precise and botanically accurate handling of his early works. Born in Suffolk, he moved to Ipswich early in his career and made a living painting portraits of local merchants and landowners often set in the Suffolk countryside. The Gravenor family is portrayed as a close-knit family unit, enclosed by intertwining trees and stalks of wheat, both symbolic of marital fidelity. The youngest daughter sits at her mother's feet and leans in towards her, further suggesting a feeling of closeness and unity. Gainsborough's approach is unsophisticated and direct and provides a showcase for his masterly brushwork. The clouds on the right side of the painting show evidence of Gainsborough's loose oil technique in their hatching and almost sketchy linear brushstrokes.

What shaped canvas has Gainsborough used, and how does it affect the image?

The sky is full of clouds which seem about to burst, particularly the ones behind the daughter in pink. What effect do they have on the painting as a whole and on the family in particular?

As well as the tastes and intellectual preferences of the English people, the unpredictable British climate inherently informed the character of English art: stormy northern skies conjured an entirely different atmosphere and type of landscape than the bright, blue clarity of southern Europe. The two most renowned English landscape painters of the nineteenth century were John Constable (1776–1837) and J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). Both artists devoted their careers to elevating the status of landscape painting to that of history painting, at the time considered the highest form of art.

Cat. 100 *overleaf*
John Constable
Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames – Morning After a Stormy Night, 1829

Oil on canvas
121.9 × 164.5 cm

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

'Tis a most delightfull country for a landscape painter. I fancy I see Gainsborough in every hedge and hollow tree.'
JOHN CONSTABLE, 1800

Cat. 100 Constable had a deep love for the worked landscapes of his native Suffolk. To this day the Stour Valley and Dedham Vale are referred to as 'Constable Country'. He called himself a 'naturalist' and spent a lifetime painting the landscapes and terrain that he knew intimately.

Constable looked to the Dutch landscape masters of the seventeenth century for inspiration and study; Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/9?–1682) was a significant influence. Centuries of shared history and shipping routes and the similar climates and landscapes of East Anglia and the Netherlands created a natural rapport between the art and artists of the two regions. *Hadleigh Castle*'s flat, broad river beds and wide expanse of sky recall not only the flatlands of the Low Countries but also many of Ruisdael's landscapes (fig. 1).

Fig. 1
Jacob van Ruisdael
View of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds, *c.* 1670/75

Oil on canvas
62 × 55 cm

Kunsthaus Zürich
Foundation Prof. Dr. L. Ruzicka

Hadleigh Castle, however, is uncharacteristic of the majority of Constable's work, with its foreboding imagery of steep hills, rocky crags, turbulent skies and crumbling ruins. Constable tended to paint the domestic stability of Suffolk farmlands, but his allusions here to decay and ruin may well be references to mortality and death. His wife Maria had died of tuberculosis in November 1828, and Constable suffered her loss for the rest of his life. The diagonal shafts of light in the background not only lead the eye across the canvas but point to ships sailing out to sea, suggesting the Christian metaphor for death.

Constable revered Reynolds for having at last raised the status of British art, and he looked to the work of Gainsborough and Claude Lorrain (1600–1682) – whose work was long considered the ideal portrayal of nature – as the best models of painted landscape.

How do the areas of colour in the top and bottom halves of this painting affect one another?

What might Constable be implying by separating the cowherd and shepherd from one another?

Turner, like his contemporary Constable, attended the Royal Academy Schools; he was only fourteen when admitted. He was elected an Academician at the age of twenty-seven and was eventually made Professor of Perspective, using the post to lecture as much on the merits of landscape painting as on his given subject. He was the most acclaimed British artist of his time, and his skill in capturing natural phenomena is as renowned today as it was in the nineteenth century.

Cat. 91 Turner was known for his ability to paint light and atmosphere in both his seascapes and landscapes. He claimed to have been lashed to the mast of a ship for four hours to learn to paint a stormy sea. Whether or not this claim was true, *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* conveys the actual experience of being aboard a ship in the middle of a storm. The pitching steamboat is a symbol of man pitted against the forces of nature.

Staffa is an island off the north-west coast of Scotland, renowned for its basalt caves and rock formations. Turner travelled to it by steamship and on the return leg was caught in a violent storm. He later wrote that he had painted the moment when the sun 'getting through the horizon, burst through the

Cat. 91
J. M. W. Turner
Staffa, Fingal's Cave, 1832

Oil on canvas
91.5 × 122 cm

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

rain-cloud, angry'. The pure yellow of the sun typifies Turner's preferred palette of vermillion, white and cadmium yellow, which led derisive art critics in the 1820s and '30s to refer to his 'yellow fever'. Turner's vibrant use of colour and tendency to disintegrate forms makes his work border almost on abstraction and led in his time to allegations of madness. In the twentieth century, he has been erroneously linked to both the Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists, due to his experiments with conveying light on canvas, but he never conveyed an instantaneous moment in front of Nature; rather he created carefully composed exhibition pieces which celebrated the timeless grandeur of Nature.

The orange-ochre tones of the sea and the blue-grey of the sky are complementary. Why might Turner have painted these blocks of opposing colour?

How does Turner's brushwork suggest turbulence and storminess?

Turner was an avid traveller. He visited Venice on three occasions, galvanised in part by his admiration of the Venetian Giovanni Antonio Canal (1697–1768), better known as Canaletto. Turner, who often made paintings in response to the artists and works he most admired, entitled his first Venetian oil painting *Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-house, Venice: Canaletti Painting*.

Venice is built on and surrounded by water and has a moist and misty climate. English artists and art lovers have long had an affinity for its art, and the city was an essential stop on the Grand Tour taken by wealthy young Englishmen to round off their education. Canaletto enjoyed their patronage and after the War of Austrian Succession (1740–1748) which temporarily curtailed such travel he moved to England in 1745 and remained there for a decade.

Cat. 17 Canaletto was popular for his *vedute*, views, and his *capriccios*, imagined views, derived from subjects taken from Venice and the Veneto. This drawing is a topographical view of the Thames, though it includes imagined details within it. In the distance on the far left is the incomplete Westminster Bridge, one of Canaletto's favourite London motifs. At the time that this drawing was made, the bridge was far nearer completion than Canaletto indicates, but drawn in this state it suggests the crumbling ruins of his native Venice.

Canaletto drew with a pen, using different types of quills, and almost always on white paper, probably to better render

the effects of light and shade. He often used a ruler, and his precisely detailed work inspired a generation of topographical artists in England. Like Paul Mellon, he was a foreigner in England who came to know it well, although he always saw it through a Venetian perspective, as Constable claimed.

Where is the viewpoint of this drawing? Is there only one?

Is this drawing strictly a topographical rendition of London, or is a story being told about the city and life along the riverside?

Cat. 17
Giovanni Antonio Canal, known as Canaletto
The City of Westminster from near the York Water Gate, *c.*1746–47

Pen and brown ink with grey wash on laid paper
384 × 714 mm

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

Developing Art Markets

In the early eighteenth century, European art markets underwent enormous transformation and growth, due in part to the activity of traditional patrons and also to the emergence of a new kind of art buyer who dealt with artists and their work in transactions very similar to those of contemporary art markets. The tastes and economic power of a mercantile class were first beginning to wield influence on both the selling and making of art.

London had a thriving economy that fuelled both the production and acquisition of art. Prints became one of the most successful British exports of the Industrial Revolution. In the early nineteenth century, Francesco Bartolozzi

(1727–1815), a Florentine engraver living in London and a founding member of the Royal Academy of Arts, was claimed by London's *Morning Post* to have 'added to our revenue at least a million sterling'.

New methods of advertising, marketing and merchandising art were being developed to appeal to Britain's emerging affluent middle class. This vibrant art market allowed artists such as William Hogarth (1697–1764) to experiment with new means of expression.

Hogarth was a painter and engraver now widely acknowledged as one of the artists responsible for the establishment of pictorial satire as well as an English style of painting which did not rely on European influence. Hogarth was both xenophobic and moralistic. He went abroad only once in his life, to France, and according to a fellow traveller, 'wherever he went, he was sure to be dissatisfied with all he saw'. He resented the aristocracy's commissioning of portraits by reputable foreign painters while dismissing contemporary English artists. His early prints criticised the art of Raphael and Michelangelo and satirised Italian opera; he urged young artists not to travel to Italy because it would 'seduce the student from nature'. Nature for Hogarth, however, was contemporary life – he was intent on depicting what he called his 'modern moral subjects' – and his artwork blends documentary reportage with moralistic instruction.

Cat. 14
William Hogarth
The Beggar's Opera, 1729

Oil on canvas
59.1 × 76.2 cm

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

Cat. 14 *The Beggar's Opera* was Hogarth's first successful oil painting, and it depicts the climactic scene of John Gay's popular English opera. The scene takes place in Newgate Prison, and Hogarth's painted setting is a hybrid of prison and stage. He in fact compared his new kind of painting, in which each figure is a character playing a specific role, to the work of playwrights and theatre producers. Here the central figure is the character Macheath, a condemned highwayman and bigamist. He is flanked by his two 'wives', Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit, who are each in the act of committing perjury towards their fathers – one the crooked lawyer and the other the jailer – on Macheath's behalf.

The grand observers on either side of the stage are not actors but audience members seated in what were considered the best seats in the house. Light falls across the foot of the stage and illuminates Lavinia Fenton, the actress playing Polly Peachum, who gazes at a man standing alert in the boxed seats. He is the Duke of Bolton, who months after the close of the show installed Fenton as his mistress.

The Beggar's Opera is an early example of Hogarth's moral subject matter, for which he is best known. His work is intended as a story or indeed as a sermon and is typically English in that it centres on tales of contemporary life rather than allegory.

What moral lesson or lessons is Hogarth trying to make with this painting?

What function do the red boxed seats have on the composition?

In 1757, Edmund Burke (1729–1797) published his treatise *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* and introduced the notion that the visual arts did not have to be agreeable or respectable in tone or content. He discussed art and artists' abilities to express sublime emotions and argued that even history painting, long accepted as a high-minded, noble genre, could evoke disquiet and passion in a viewer.

Cat. 74
William Blake
Plate 25: "And there was heard a great lamenting in Beulah", from *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, 1804–20

Relief etching printed in orange, with pen and ink, watercolour, and gold on wove paper
343 × 264 mm

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

Cat. 74 William Blake (1757–1827) was a unique, visionary painter and poet who produced prophetic and apocalyptic images in his paintings and illustrated books that affected Burke's notion of the sublime. Blake was adamantly anti-establishment, considering oil painting the overwrought medium of academic art, and he pursued his inspiration alone. He studied Gothic sculpture in Westminster Abbey and engravings of Michelangelo's muscular figures; their influence can be witnessed here.

Blake invented new methods of production, in particular 'illuminated printing', in which the pages of his small books were printed from copper plates that combined text and image. After printing, the illustrations were painted in watercolours, making each book a unique piece of art. *Jerusalem*, one of his most complex works, was printed in orange and then washed in watercolour, ink and gold. One hundred pages in total, the book's theme is mankind's – and in particular the British people's – worship of materialism and reason, and its subsequent fall from grace. Plate 25 is the final illustration of the first chapter, and depicts Albion (humankind) in the act of being disembowelled. The book ends with the redemption of man through the mercy of Christ. Mellon owned one of the most important collections of Blake's illuminated books.

In the 1930s Mary Conover Mellon had become deeply interested in the psychology of Carl Jung and decided to publish his writings in English. Together with Paul Mellon, she established the Bollingen Foundation, named after Jung's Swiss retreat. William McGuire, one of the Foundation's editors, wrote in *Bollingen: An Adventure in Collecting the Past* that Blake 'was drawing upon the same sources as Jung: the Western esoteric tradition, the "perennial philosophy", in which both were looking for what Coleridge called "facts of mind"'. Paul Mellon wrote of his interest in Blake's 'haunting poetry with its arcane mythology'. Literary scholars, predominantly American, did not begin a concerted study of his prophetic books until the twentieth century.

The illustration of Plate 25 occupies the entire space of the page, right up to the edges on each side. What kind of feeling does this convey and how is it appropriate to the context of the image?

Do the figures seem accurately in proportion? Does it matter? What function do their postures and grouping play?

Although Blake, Burke and their radical peers, such as the essayist William Hazlitt (1778–1830), exhorted artists to stop

making agreeable and proselytising art, they did not for a moment support the idea that the opinions of the public at large held any worth in judging an artwork's value or quality. When members of the art-buying public began to resent their perceived roles, artists such as Thomas Rowlandson (1757–1827) gained immense popularity by appealing to buyers tired of both edifying art and highbrow snobbishness. Rowlandson was both a serious, talented watercolour artist and a major contributor to the fast expanding genre of satire.

Cat. 68 Rowlandson was politically impartial and rather than offer strong moralistic statements like Hogarth or savage satire like his contemporary James Gillray (1757–1815), he produced watercolours and prints depicting comic episodes which nonetheless engaged with a critique of social mores. His style was influenced both by Gainsborough and the French Rococo artists. *The Exhibition Stare-case* is an example of his delicate pen and ink drawings filled with elegant washes of watercolour.

The Royal Academy of Arts was first housed in Somerset House on the Strand and its stairway was designed by Sir William Chambers. The Academy claimed that the climb upstairs was 'easy and convenient', and also expressed aspiration to the spiritual realm of High Art, but the reality was otherwise. Three elliptical flights of stairs led to the Great Room where the Academy's annual exhibition was hung, and they were extremely steep and difficult to climb. Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) claimed that anyone able to climb to the top of all three flights without resting had achieved the acme of fitness.

Rowlandson illustrated the building's graceful architecture with a gently arching dome and Classical bas-reliefs set atop an undulating banister that sweeps down and across the image and a statue of Venus arching backwards and admiring her own bottom. In contrast, a decidedly inelegant wave of art viewers tumble clumsily down the precarious staircase into increasing states of disarray. The ladies towards the bottom of the stairs have toppled upside down and revealed their own nether regions; not a single bystander looks at the Greek Venus with so much living flesh on display. Though Chambers hoped that his staircase might suggest the ascent of Mount Parnassus, mythical home of the Muses, Rowlandson instead hints at the Fall of Man at the Last Judgement with this comic descent into chaos.

Who or what do you think Rowlandson is satirising?

How do the message and tone of Rowlandson's caricature differ from that of Hogarth's moralistic painting (cat. 14)?

Cat. 68
Thomas Rowlandson
The Exhibition Stare-case, Somerset House, c. 1800

Watercolour with pen and ink over graphite on wove paper
445 × 297 mm

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

The Royal Academy of Arts

In France the reinstitution of the Paris Salon led some English art commentators to question Britain's standing in respect to the power and prosperity of the French art world. In August 1737, London's *Daily Post* reviewed the exhibition of the Paris Salon at the Louvre:

> What a discouragement it is to the ingenious men of Great Britain that we have no yearly prizes to reward their pains and application for the service of mankind; or publick honour to bestow on their services as in France! They might well complain that we don't imitate the French in their best qualities, but take particular care to outdo them in their worst. Good painters, Engravers, and Statuaries are very useful men; they add to the capital stock as well as to the honour of the Country, besides the noble and instructing amusement which they afford.

The *Post*'s journalist clearly felt the need to persuade the British public of art's usefulness and importance, and in 1768 George III founded the Royal Academy of Arts. Joshua Reynolds was its first president, and while both he and the Academy had their critics – notably William Blake and William Hazlitt – a professional society of painters, architects, sculptors and printmakers had been founded to promote 'the arts of design'.

Sir Joshua Reynolds was an English portraitist who gained immense popularity with aristocratic English society. He was a welcome guest in the town and country houses of the elegant English elite and equally at home in intellectual circles. He counted Dr Johnson as a good friend. Both men shared a belief in the authority of art and in the rules of taste. After the founding of the Royal Academy, Reynolds delivered to its members and students his *Discourses on Art*, a series of fifteen lectures laying out the new institution's policy and theory with specific reference to the training of young artists. In stark contrast to Hogarth's xenophobia – of which Reynolds was outspoken in his disdain – Reynolds exhorted students to study the Italian Renaissance masters such as Raphael, Michelangelo and Titian. For him, grandeur and loftiness were the only aims appropriate to the pursuit of great art. Reynolds's discourses were highly regarded and their author was the most influential painter in eighteenth-century England in raising the profile of British art both within and beyond Britain.

'Instead of endeavouring to amuse mankind with the minute neatness of his imitations, the genuine painter must endeavour to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas.'
SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS, *Discourse III*, 1770

Cat. 31
Sir Joshua Reynolds
Mrs. Abington as Miss Prue in William Congreve's "Love for Love", 1771

Oil on canvas
76.8 × 63.7 cm

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

Cat. 31 The actress Frances Abington, née Fanny Barton, was born and raised in the slums of Drury Lane before marrying one of the king's trumpeters, James Abington, and becoming a starring member of the Drury Lane Company.

Reynolds painted her portrait at least six times. In this work, she is portrayed in character and seated in what would have been considered an undignified, suggestive pose, totally inappropriate for a lady. Her thumb strokes her lip, and she gazes thoughtfully and almost directly at the viewer. The peach silk and creamy

lace of her gown accent the warmth in her cheeks and the smoothness of her complexion. The dog's curly fur echoes the folds of her delicate lace cuffs and collar, which are boldly picked out against the background's stark blackness. The background itself is divided: one-third of it is a stormy sky and the remaining two-thirds are flat and black and suggest the backdrop of a stage. The effect suggests a fusion of nature and the theatre, not unlike Hogarth's *Beggar's Opera* (cat. 14).

What effect do Mrs Abington's black wristbands have on the image?

What role does the chair play in the composition and context of this painting?

State of Neglect

'None of the other nations of Europe has so abject an inferiority complex about its own aesthetic capabilities as England.'
NIKOLAUS PEVSNER, 1956

Despite the surge of influence, productivity and creativity of British art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by the time Paul Mellon began to collect it in the 1950s, it had fallen largely out of favour with both the European and American art markets. Most of the art establishment favoured the work of the Italian Renaissance and the Northern Masters. From the 1890s, American collectors such as the industrialist Henry Clay Frick, the American railroad magnate Henry Huntington, and indeed Andrew Mellon, bought large-scale, formal English eighteenth-century portraits by artists such as Reynolds, Gainsborough and Thomas Lawrence (1769–1830), but after the Great Depression and two World Wars, the market for British art had ground nearly to a halt.

The academic study of British art was also virtually non-existent in either country before Mellon began to collect it. With the exception of a few curators and museum directors in galleries specifically devoted to British art, public institutions in the years before the Second World War did little to promote it. In the early twentieth century, the commercial art market was in fact the force most responsible for any research into historic British painting. Dealers would hire librarians to produce written information about artworks available for sale. Paul Mellon refers to the art trade of the 1950s as 'very unspoilt'; the supply of British art was high and its price and demand were low.

Mellon's second wife Bunny and many of his acquaintances collected French Impressionist work and had little interest in British art, and Mellon felt he needed help in acquiring it. In 1959 he visited London and invited Basil Taylor of the Royal College of Art to lunch at Claridge's. During the course of the meal, the two acknowledged British art's state of neglect, admitted a mutual love of George Stubbs's art, and agreed that Mellon would begin to collect British art with Taylor as his advisor. Taylor's only stipulation was that he not receive any payment for his counsel. The only kind of gift he ever agreed to receive was a case of wine, preferably claret, at Christmas.

Fig. 2
George Stubbs
Zebra, 1762–3
Oil on canvas
103 × 127.5 cm
Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

Taylor set to work befriending London art dealers and soon discovered those with a love of British art. In 1960 he alerted Mellon to the sale of a Stubbs painting of a zebra, available for auction at Harrods (fig. 2, cat. 23). The painting was being sold rather inauspiciously amidst a jumble of used household furniture and goods, including washing machines. Unfortunately Taylor was not the only agent to hear about its impending sale, but after stiff competition from a number of interested buyers, an anonymous bidder – in fact Paul Mellon – eventually won the oil painting for the then enormous sum of £20,000.

'One of my failings as a collector may be my lack of curiosity about the lives of the artists, their social and political backgrounds and their places in history. I am also little interested in their techniques, their materials, or their methods of working. I sometimes worry about it, but then I say to myself, "Why should I have to?"'
PAUL MELLON, 1992

Mellon later encountered another Stubbs in New York City. He took a strong dislike to it and did not buy it, but while at the gallery fell in love with and eventually bought at auction an abstract watercolour by the British modernist Ben Nicholson (1894–1982). The episode illustrates Mellon's method of collecting, which by his own admission was based on instinct rather than intellect. His lack of interest in an artist's background, method or social context in fact echoes post-modern critical theory, as in the writings of French philosopher Roland Barthes (1915–1980), who argues in *Death of the Author*

Fig. 3
Francis Towne
Ambleside, 1786

Watercolour with pen and brown and grey ink over graphite on laid paper
235 × 156 mm

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection
Photo by Richard Caspole, Yale Center for British Art.

'English Art, as well as being personally desirable, seemed to me long neglected or even abandoned, not only in this country but also in its homeland.'
PAUL MELLON, 1963

that the viewer, rather than the artist, is the author of an artwork, as the artist's intentions can never fully be known. Mellon would not, however, have considered himself a critical theorist. He chose works that stirred an emotional response in him:

When I buy a painting, some feature about it may remind me consciously or unconsciously of some past event, thought, feeling, moment of pleasure or even of sadness. It might just be a fortuitous combination of colors, or a certain calmness, or a beautiful sense of proportion. In the case of a portrait, perhaps it is the sitter's character, air of intelligence, or hint of humor. Would I like her or him? It seems to me that art makes one feel the essence of something, turning the ordinary, everyday object or scene into a universal one. Like poetry for Wordsworth, it is 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'.

In Basil Taylor, Mellon had found an advisor who could not only recommend works of the highest quality, but who shared a love and affection for British art similar to his own. Taylor first introduced Mellon to English watercolours, now represented in the Mellon Collection by works such as this piece by Francis Towne (1739–1816), famed for his watercolours of the Lake District (fig. 3, cat. 44).

The Re-establishment of British Art

In April 1963, an exhibition of Paul Mellon's collection of British art opened at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Mellon and Taylor together selected the works to be shown, and Taylor hung them and wrote the exhibition catalogue. Leslie Cheek, director of the museum, organised the opening, which was attended by the elite of American and English society.

The exhibition consisted of 324 paintings and 127 drawings with galleries respectively dedicated to landscape, men and society, animals and sport, and subject pictures. Taylor and Mellon did not choose any formal portraits, as they felt they were already well represented in American galleries. Exhibited works included Hogarth's *The Beggar's Opera* (cat. 14), Canaletto's *Lord Mayor's Procession,* Zoffany's (1733–1810) *The Drummond Family*, Gainsborough's *Richard Lloyd and Sister*, Constable's *Hadleigh Castle* (cat. 100), and Stubbs' *Zebra* (fig. 1). The exhibition relaunched British art, and Mellon claims in his memoirs that the achievement was due to the efforts and wisdom of Basil Taylor. The show travelled to the Royal Academy in December 1964 and the Yale University Art Gallery in the spring of 1965. While at the Royal Academy, the show enjoyed good attendance, although the English press wondered why a man of Mellon's means would buy British art when he could afford French masterpieces. Mellon, however, felt that at last English art had begun to achieve the status it deserved in the form of a collection that would soon enter the public realm.

British Art in the Public Domain

In July 1963 Mellon decided to choose an American repository for his British collection. His preference was for the collection to be housed in either Washington DC or at Yale University. He owned a house in Washington across the road from Sir Edwin Lutyens's (1869–1944) British Embassy, but he worried that the building was not big enough and that the metropolitan location would face parking problems. The National Gallery was deemed inappropriate because of its own space issues; Mellon feared that his collection might be dispersed throughout the National Gallery's own collection, diluting its impact and wholeness as a collection of British works.

Conclusion

Mellon at last decided to donate his collection to Yale University and with it founded the Center for British Art. The Center is housed in a modernist building designed by Louis Kahn (1901–1974); Mellon referred to its 'elegant style and fine proportions'. His primary goal in establishing the Center was to offer young people and scholars an immediate experience of British art at an American university known for its British studies. As Mellon's extraordinary collection illustrates, his favoured period produced a wealth of celebrated art, most of which significantly influenced contemporary and future artists, and all of which is intrinsically English.

'Collecting … is such a matter of time and chance – intellectual bent, individual temperament, personal taste, available resources, changing fashion – and the psychologists tells us, even very early child training – and my own motives as a collector seem to myself extremely mixed…'
PAUL MELLON, 1963

'I thought of the Center as an ideal institution for the study of British art and only incidentally of British manners and customs, of its history and mores.'
PAUL MELLON, 1992

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Cat. 14 (detail)
William Hogarth
The Beggar's Opera, 1729
see page 12