

Power & Beauty

THE ART OF
SIR OSWALD BIRLEY



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FOREWORD

The human record of 20th-century Britain was, in part, created by our great portrait painters. Sir Oswald Birley was the establishment portraitist *par excellence* of the second Georgian Age with an estimable ability to capture the talent, power and beauty of the era. When Birley died in 1952, his death was reported prominently in newspapers around the world.

This exhibition is the first of any size devoted to Birley since his memorial display held in London in July 1954. As a gallery, we have always sought to add to and enrich knowledge of the artists we admire and, following a conversation with Robin Birley, grandson of Sir Oswald Birley, the idea took shape to give the artist the recognition he deserves by corraling a body of works that illustrate the range and development of his talents. This selection displays his 'power portraits', including an arresting private image of Winston Churchill, shown here for the first time, as well as paintings loaned from public institutions. It also includes, as a defining and thrilling addition, unseen private portraits of family and friends that showcase the elegancy through which he saw these more intimately-known subjects. To accompany this, Dr Jonathan Black, our curator, has broken new biographical ground by brilliantly retrieving many lost and forgotten facts about Birley's globetrotting progress over half a century.

For more than three decades following his career-defining debut solo exhibition in London in 1919, Birley was the 'go-to' portraitist for kings, queens, presidents, princes and potentates. The roll call also included political leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi; plutocrats and generals such as Dwight Eisenhower; leading 20th-century American financial titans such as Andrew Mellon and John Pierpont Morgan; and eminent British figures such as Lord Camrose and Lord Astor. His constant travel, together with rare retreats from the day-to-day rigours of painting portraits, also allowed him to paint his surroundings, as well as the landscapes and buildings that appealed to his sensibilities, which Lawrence Hendra, Head of Research at Philip Mould & Co., has illuminated in a separate essay in this catalogue.

Birley was an artist renowned for producing paintings that were masterfully executed, combining an enriching aesthetic and psychological realism. At the peak of his career, his works were hailed as more than equal to the achievements of artistic contemporaries like Augustus John and Sir John Lavery. Furthermore, Birley was regarded by many critical heavyweights as the natural successor of a grand tradition of portrait painting giants, such as Hans Holbein the Younger, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Anthony van Dyck and Diego Velázquez.

Power & Beauty follows a broad chronological development as distinguished by the artist's early years and the First World War; success in the dazzling 1920s; his vision of his favourite sitter, his wife; his official apogee, the 1930s and 1940s; and Birley and America.



Birley was an artist blessed with talent in abundance, who enjoyed an enduring popularity during his lifetime. However, his significance within the history of 20th-century British portraiture today is somewhat downplayed, the result of which has positioned Birley in the popular mind in a state of undeserved obscurity. This exhibition offers an opportunity to re-examine the ingenuity of Birley as the portrait painter of the 'English governing classes' and reposition him within a respected and illustrious tradition of portraiture in Britain. If any name should conjure an association with the forgotten glamour and prowess of high-society portraiture in Britain between the wars, that name is Birley.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank our lenders, both private and institutional, including the lenders who have wished to remain anonymous, without whose generosity this exhibition would not have been possible; our sponsors, Robin Birley and 5 Hertford Street, again without whom this exhibition would not have been possible; Josephine Fitzalan Howard for her resourceful and invaluable role as Assistant Curator; the crucial in-house staff support of Laura Edmundson, Emma Rutherford, Rebecca Ingram, Laurie Lewis and Catherine Mould.

Philip Mould OBE

CHRONOLOGY

31 March 1880: Oswald Hornby Joseph Birley born Auckland, New Zealand, only child of Hugh Francis Birley (1856-1916) of Salford, Lancashire and Elizabeth McCorquodale (1856-1928) of Newton-le-Willows, Lancashire.

1891-93: Pupil at Rugby School, Warwickshire, parents living St. Asaph, Flintshire, North Wales.

1893-96: Pupil at Harrow School, Middlesex.

July 1896: Wins that year's Harrow Drawing Prize.

July-August 1897: Studies works by Diego Velazquez, Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Hals in the art galleries of Berlin, Dresden and Munich.

October 1898-June 1899: Studies History at Trinity College, Cambridge.

1900-05: Studies painting at the Academie Julian, 31 Rue du Dragon in Paris under Marcel Baschet (1862-1941) and at the St. John's Wood School of Art, London.

September 1901: Exhibits at the Liverpool Autumn Salon.

1902-03: Befriends 'Glasgow Boys' Harrington Mann, John Lavery and John Guthrie.

May 1902: Receives an 'honourable mention' for *Portrait of a Woman* at the Paris Salon.

May 1904: Exhibits for first time at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, London (exhibits there nearly every year thereafter until his death 48 years later). Rents studio at 6 Rue de Furstenberg, Sixth Arrondissement (Saint-Germain-des-Prés), Paris.

1905-06: Spends much of the year in Madrid intensively studying the art of; Diego Velázquez, Francisco de Zurbarán, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo and Francisco Goya.

May 1906: Rents studio at 48 Grove End Road, St. John's Wood, NW8, which he retains until c. 1923.

1911: Lives with his parents and five servants at 41 Circus Road, London NW8.

February 1911: Gains significant success with exhibition of large canvas *The Theatre Box* with the Modern Portrait Society, London.

February 1912: Elected member of Royal Society of Portrait Painters.

February 1912: Nominated for election as an Associate of the Royal Academy (ARA) by: Sir George Frampton; Frederic Pomeroy, Bertram Mackennel, Reginald Blomfield and Sir James Jebusa Shannon.

June 1913: Exhibits at Royal Society of Portrait Painters and identified as leading British portraitist alongside William Orpen, William Nicholson, Glyn Philpot, John Lavery and John Singer Sargent.

1914: Commissioned to paint Lord Chief Justice of England Rufus Isaacs (later 1st Marquess of Reading), 2nd Viscount Knutsford for the Royal London Hospital and leading Liberal MP and collector Sir Alfred Mond (later 1st Baron Melchett).

29 August 1914: Volunteers for 10th Royal Fusiliers (City of London Stock Exchange Battalion); gives age as 28 when actually 34. Address: 41 Circus Road, London NW8 (still living with parents).

24 November 1914: Receives military commission as a Second Lieutenant, 10th (Service) Battalion Royal Fusiliers.

21 July 1916: Promoted to First Lieutenant and posted to XV Corps HQ on the Somme as an Intelligence Officer. XV Corps commanded by his uncle by marriage Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Sinclair Horne.

27 January 1917: Promoted to Captain and transferred to the Intelligence Corps and to HQ of First Army commanded by General Horne.

Late December 1917: Awarded Military Cross for bravery and 'coolness' under fire in France and Flanders flying reconnaissance and artillery spotting missions with a flight of Bristol Fighter-Bombers attached to the HQ of First Army.

21 March 1919: Ended the war as Captain in the Intelligence Corps with Medical Category of B1 (exposed to mustard gas in late 1918). Address: 47 Albion Street, Hyde Park, London.

October 1919: Holds first solo exhibition at Agnews, Old Bond Street, London (26 oil paintings: 25 portraits and 1 interior scene). The show widely judged a success.

December 1919: Elected member of Buck's Club, Clifford Street, Mayfair.

January 1920: Nominated for election as ARA by: Sir Frank Dicksee, Frank Short, Sir David Murray and H.S. Tuke.

June 1921: Holds joint exhibition at Knoedler's Gallery, Fifth Avenue, New York with Glyn Philpot and Gerald Kelly.

September 1921: Marries Quaker Anglo-Irish beauty Rhoda Vava Lecky Pike (1900-81) from Kilnock, County Carlow. Honeymoon in Venice.

1922-24: Architect Clough Williams-Ellis MC designs a studio-home for Birley and Rhoda: The Corner House, 62 Wellington Road, St John's Wood, NW8.

July 1922: Rhoda gives birth to a daughter, Maxime.

November 1922-May 1923: First trip with Rhoda to New York, Washington DC and Philadelphia.

January 1923: Holds exhibition *Portraits By Oswald Birley*, at the Duveen Galleries, 56th Street and 720 Fifth Avenue, New York (11 oil paintings – all portraits).

June 1923: Worship Company of Goldsmiths commissions Birley to paint portrait of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin.

January-June 1924: Birley and Rhoda in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and California.

February 1924: Duveen arranges for Birley to paint portraits of major collectors Henry Edwards Huntingdon and his wife Arabella for the planned Henry E. Huntingdon Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

20 March-3 April 1924: Holds exhibition *Portraits by Oswald Birley* at Duveen Galleries, New York (35 oil paintings – all portraits).

November 1924: Birley and Rhoda sail for New York.

January-April 1925: Birley and Rhoda staying at the Everglades Club, Palm Beach, Florida.

Late May 1925: Birley and Rhoda sail from New York for UK.

December 1925: Maxime Birley almost dies from pneumonia.

January 1926: Birley and Rhoda in New York and Chicago.

February-March 1926: Birley and Rhoda stay at Everglades Club, Palm Beach, Florida.

April 1926: In Mexico City Birley paints portrait of dictatorial President Plutarco Elias Calles.

May-June 1926: Birley and Rhoda in New York.

Late June 1926: Birley and Rhoda return to London.

September 1926: Elected member of White's Club, St. James's Street, London.

Mid-December 1926: Birley and Rhoda sail from Marseilles for India (Bombay). Trip organised by Lord Lloyd, the then High Commissioner for Egypt and, previously, Governor of Bombay.

January-April 1927: Birley and Rhoda in India (Madras), then Egypt and Palestine on return journey to England.

April-May 1927: Commission to paint portrait of King George V for the National Museum Wales, Cardiff.

October 1927: Commission to paint a series of portraits: *Past Presidents of the Governing Council* for the National Museum Wales, Cardiff.

January 1928: Paints portrait of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin for the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths.

Late January 1928: Birley and Rhoda sail for New York.

March 1928: Holds solo exhibition at the Duveen Galleries, New York.

Mid May 1928: Birley and Rhoda back in London.

June 1928: Paints portraits of King George V for the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff.

Mid December 1928: Birley and Rhoda sail for Siam (Thailand).

January-February 1929: Birley paints King Rama VII of Siam and his Queen in Bangkok.

March 1929: On return trip to UK Birley and Rhoda visit India.

Early May 1929: Birley and Rhoda arrive back in London.

May 1930: Rhoda gives birth to a son, Mark.

July 1931: Birley's portrait series: *Past Presidents of the National Museum Wales* on display in the Museum's Court Room.

November 1931: Birley paints portrait of Indian Nationalist leader Mohandas K. Gandhi for Chief Minister of Gujarat.

1931: Purchases Charleston Manor, West Dean, East Sussex (habitable, after alterations by local architect Walter Hindes Godley, from early 1934).

April 1932: Royal Academy Summer Exhibition rejects Birley's portrait of Gandhi (approved by Selection Committee but banned by the RA's Council).

January 1933: Commissioned to paint King George V as Senior Bencher of Lincoln's Inn.

Early 1934: Commissioned to paint Duchess of York (future Queen Elizabeth) as Colonel-in-Chief of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.

March-April 1934: Birley and Rhoda visit India and stay with old friend Mickey Knatchbull-Hugesson, Lord Brabourne, Governor of Bombay.

1934: Commission of portrait of Sir John Reith for the BBC, London.

March 1934: Portrait of previous Viceroy of India, Lord Irwin, later Earl Halifax, unveiled in Viceroy's House, New Delhi.

November 1934: Birley's appreciation of French caricaturist Sem (Georges Goursat) appears in *The Times*.

January-March 1935: Birley visits Lord Brabourne and shoots game in India (Sind and Baluchistan).

Early 1936: Commission from the Nizam of Hyderabad to paint Viceroy 1st Marquess of Willingdon (Viceroy, 1931-1936) for the Chamber of Indian Princes, New Delhi.

September 1937: Colonel John Jacob Astor, owner of *The Times*, presents Birley's conversation piece: *At Printing House Square* to the newspaper.

November 1937: Commission to paint King George VI by Royal Veterinarian Society.

January 1938: Elected to Garrick Club.

November 1938: Birley's portrait of former Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin as Chancellor of Cambridge University is presented to the Carlton Club, London.

February 1939: Birley almost elected an ARA but loses out to Robert Sargent Austin and then Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson.

March 1939: Birley and Rhoda dine at No. 10 Downing Street with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax.

April 1939: Paints King George VI for Royal Agricultural Society of England and the Royal Veterinarian Society at Windsor Castle.

April 1939: Almost elected an ARA but loses out to A. R. Middleton Todd and then Ronald Ossory Dunlop.

May 1939: Exhibits with a group of selected British Artists in the annual Paris Salon.

July 1939: Receives a Gold Medal from the French Government.

October-November 1939: tries without success to be appointed an official war artist.

May 1940: Joins Sussex Home Guard, initially serves as a Captain in command of a platoon – rises to rank of Major and promoted to sector command.

August 1940: Receives appointment from the War Artists Advisory Committee [WAAC] of the MoI to become portraitist attached to the RAF/Air Ministry.

January 1941: Near miss from German bombs make 62 Wellington Road uninhabitable. Birley and Rhoda move to Charleston Manor.

February-June 1941: Paints several senior officers for the RAF and WAAC. Fee: 35 guineas a portrait.

Late July 1941: Contract with the WAAC is not renewed.

Mid-October 1941: Loses his right eye when an experimental anti-tank gun, the Blacker Bombard, blows up, while supervising a demonstration of its use.

November 1942: Put up for election for last time as an ARA but insists his name be withdrawn.

June 1943: Commission to paint retiring Viceroy of India, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow, for the Viceroy's House, New Delhi.

April 1944: Commission from the Royal Naval College at Greenwich to paint King George VI as an Admiral of the Fleet.

July 1944: Leaves 62 Wellington Road after a near miss from a V-1 Flying Bomb blows in all the windows.

November 1944: Elected Vice-President of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters.

January 1945: Commission from the Speaker of the House of Commons to paint Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

April 1946: Meets Winston Churchill for the first time.

May 1946: Paints Field Marshal Viscount Alexander for White's Club.

June 1946: Paints portrait of Winston Churchill (now Leader of the Opposition).

July 1946: Maxime Birley marries Comte Alain de La Falaise in London.

October 1946: Birley seriously ill from bronchitis and breathing problems.

March 1947: Receives commission from University College, Oxford to paint portrait of Prime Minister Clement Attlee (completed by September).

October 1947: Opens exhibition *Portraits of Indian Leaders by Indian Artists* at India House, London.

December 1947: Discusses the Royal Academy's *Art from India and Pakistan* exhibition with Winifred Holmes on the BBC's Eastern Services Network.

March 1948: Commission from the Imperial War Museum, London to paint Field Marshal Lord Montgomery of Alamein.

March-April 1948: Paints portrait of HM Queen Elizabeth to hang in the main lounge of the new Cunard-White Star transatlantic passenger liner *Queen Elizabeth*.

January-February 1949: Birley and Rhoda visit Washington DC, to see the new National Gallery of Art, and then stay at Mar-a-Lago, on South Ocean Boulevard, Palm Beach, Florida, owned by Marjorie Merriweather-Post-Davies.

April 1949: Made member of The Other Club at the instigation of founder Winston Churchill.

June 1949: Receives knighthood.

July 1949: Commission from King George VI to paint Princess Elizabeth as a Knight of the Garter.

January 1950: Commission from the Royal Horse Guards to paint a portrait of King George VI as their Colonel-in-Chief.

January-April 1950: Birley in New York, with Rhoda, to paint Chairman of the Cunard-White Star Line.

May 1950: Commission from the Coldstream Guards to paint King George VI as their Colonel-in-Chief.

August 1950: Exhibits series of portraits of Admirals for the Royal Naval College at the National Maritime Museum, London.

January-March 1951: Birley and Rhoda stay with Marjorie Merriweather-Post-Davies in New York and at Mar-a-Lago, Palm Beach, Florida.

April 1951: Commission from Trinity House, Port of London Authority, to paint Winston Churchill as an Elder Brother (painted August 1951).

May 1951: Holds Retrospective Exhibition *Portraits and Other Paintings* at the Royal Institute Galleries, London; opens *Treasures from Country Houses* exhibition, Northampton Art Gallery.

September 1951: Paints General Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander of NATO in Paris.

December 1951: Paints Winston Churchill wearing his so-called 'siren suit'.

January 1952: Has a major operation on his chest to aid breathing.

March-mid April 1952: Birley and Rhoda stay in Florida and New York with Marjorie Merriweather-Post-Davies.

6 May 1952: Dies at 62 Wellington Rd from a throat infection contracted on board the liner *Queen Elizabeth* returning to UK in late April that year.

10 May 1952: Buried in an unmarked grave in the churchyard of All Saints Anglican Church, West Dean, East Sussex.

14 May 1952: Memorial Service for Birley held at St. Paul's, Knightsbridge.

July 1954: Small Birley memorial exhibition held at 62 Wellington Road, London. Portrait of General (now President) Eisenhower presented by Field Marshal Lord Alexander to the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, via the sitter.

September 1958: Bronze portrait bust of Birley by Clare Sheridan unveiled inside All Saints Parish Church, West Dean by Lady Clementine Churchill.

June-July 1969: Small Birley exhibition held at Charleston Manor, East Sussex.

October 1980: Sale of Charleston Manor and contents of Birley's studios there.

Dr Jonathan Black

THE LIFE AND PORTRAITURE OF SIR OSWALD BIRLEY MC



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

When the news broke early in May 1952 of Sir Oswald Birley's death at the age of 72, it provoked expressions of sadness and regret from his artistic peers and critics that were unusually genuine and heartfelt. It is clear that he was admired for his gentlemanly character as much as for his evident artistic skill.

As many of the more sensitive and perceptive obituaries noted in 1952, Birley deserved to be remembered as a gifted and skilful practitioner whose work effortlessly summoned a bygone age of luxurious plenty from before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Early years

Oswald Hornby Joseph Birley was born in Auckland, New Zealand, in March 1880 into an upper-middle-class family. Both his parents came from wealthy mercantile and business backgrounds – they were in New Zealand briefly as part of a world tour undertaken after their wedding in 1879. Hugh Francis Birley (1856–1916) was born in Lancashire; his father owned a textile-spinning mill in Salford. Birley's mother, Elizabeth McCorquodale (1856–1928), was a Scot from the north-eastern Highlands. Her family owned land in Sutherland and Caithness in North Wales near St Asaph, and they had an interest in a paper mill at Penicuik near Peebles.

Young Oswald was educated first at Rugby School (his father's old public school) and then transferred to Harrow School in 1893, possibly because it was felt to be more receptive to the needs of a boy with definite 'artistic' leanings. Oswald appears to have greatly enjoyed his time at Harrow, which then had a reputation for producing idiosyncratic, individualistic traditionalists. It was at Harrow that he first displayed a particular penchant for portraiture.

Birley left Harrow in the summer of 1896 and took a tour of Western European art galleries and museums with his father for the best part of a year. There is evidence for his close study of portraits by Anthony Van Dyck, Peter Paul Rubens, Frans Hals, Rembrandt van Rijn and Diego Velázquez in Amsterdam, Berlin, Dresden, the Hague, Haarlem, Munich and Paris. In October 1898, he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, to study History, but left at the end of his first year. He had already begun to paint and exhibit his first formal portraits, usually of family and friends (figs 1 and 2) which seem indebted not so much to the old masters he had recently scrutinised, but more to John Singer Sargent.¹

By 1900, Birley had a studio on the Left Bank of Paris in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés area (fig. 3), within easy walking distance of the Académie Julian, where he enrolled as a pupil of Marcel Baschet 1900–05. Fellow pupils at the Académie at the time with whom he was friendly included Gerald Kelly, Glyn Philpot, Philip Connard, Francis Campbell Boileau Cadell and Alfred Munnings.



Fig. 5

Fig. 1 Oswald Birley, *R. L. Greenshields*, 1898, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, whereabouts unknown.

Fig. 2 Oswald Birley, *Mrs. T. Guthrie Williamson and Daughter*, 1901, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, whereabouts unknown.

Fig. 3 Birley and friend in Birley's Paris studio, c. 1901.

Fig. 4 Interior of the studio at 62 Wellington Road, c. 1920s; copies by Birley, c. 1898-99, of *The Jester 'Don Juan of Austria'* by Velázquez (c. 1632-35, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid) on the left and above the fireplace *Prince Baltasar Carlos on Horseback* also by Velázquez (c. 1634-35, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid).

Fig. 5 Oswald Birley, *Beatrice Collier as an Apache*, c. 1909-10, oil on canvas, 197.5 x 126.4 cm, Private Collection.



Fig. 4

Birley later told his daughter Maxime (christened Maxine, she changed her name to Maxime by which she was always known) that, when a teenager and budding art student in his early 20s, he could never have enough exposure to 18th- and 19th-century English portraiture, in particular Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, George Romney and James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Maxime also noted that it had long been rumoured that, as an art student in Paris, her father had had a long affair with the beautiful French singer and early star of French cinema, Mistinguett, whose legs had, at the height of her fame, been insured for half a million francs.

From 1905, Birley spent a year living in Madrid, obsessively painting copies of works in the Museo Nacional Del Prado by Diego Velázquez, as two of his other artistic heroes had before him: Édouard Manet in the 1860s and John Singer Sargent in the late 1870s.^{2,3} Two of these copies would be prominently displayed from *circa* 1923 on the far wall of Birley's new studio at 62 Wellington Road, St John's Wood, London (fig. 4).

By autumn 1906, he had settled down in St John's Wood, living with his parents in a large 14-room house on Circus Road, with a studio on the nearby Grove End Road. Works of this period indicate an ongoing engagement with evolving French Impressionism – especially the more *intimiste* imagery of the so-called *Nabis* such as Édouard Vuillard.⁴

Rise to prominence

Birley first came to critical and public attention for his engaging images of fashionable, up-and-coming actresses performing theatrical and music hall roles, and sometimes dressed in eye-catching period costume, such as Beatrice Collier (fig. 5) and Mabel Beardsley (cat. 2). He also produced an ambitious group portrait (cat. 3) of figures involved with the London theatrical world, which included the successful Australian-born playwright Charles Haddon Chambers, and fashionable man-about-town the Hon. Wilfred Egerton.

By 1914, Birley's star was in the ascendant. He had been identified by several leading art critics as a portraitist of great promise, and likely to rank alongside slightly older pretenders to Singer Sargent's mantle such as Augustus John, Sir William Orpen, William Nicholson and Ambrose McEvoy.⁵ In 1912, he had been elected a member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters (RSPP) and the same year nominated for the first time to be made an Associate of the Royal Academy.⁶

The Great War

With the outbreak of the First World War, Birley first tried to obtain a commission in the Rifle Brigade. He passed his medical examination but was turned down on account of being a few years too old. He returned to volunteer as a Private in the Royal Fusiliers, this



Fig. 6

Fig. 6 Oswald Birley, *Tattenham Corner*, 1916, black paint on wooden board, 45.8 x 91.5 cm, Imperial War Museum, London.

Fig. 7 Oswald Birley, *Miss Muriel Gore in a Fortuny Dress*, 1919, oil on canvas, 101.5 x 76 cm, Private Collection.

Fig. 8 Oswald Birley, *Sydney Holland, 2nd Viscount Knutsford*, 1914, oil on canvas, 88 x 66 cm, Royal London Hospital Museum.

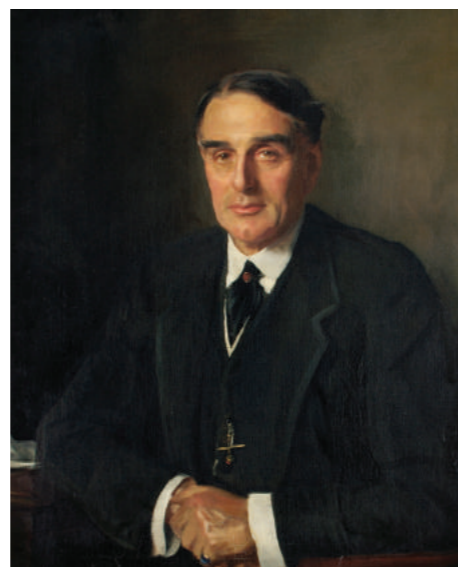


Fig. 8

time knocking five years off his age. He was accepted and, by the end of November 1914, had been given a commission as a Second Lieutenant. He finally reached France early in July 1916, when he was posted as an Intelligence Officer to XV Corps Headquarters (cat. 8). It was probably not a coincidence that the Corps Commander, Major-General Henry Horne (1861–1929), was related to Birley by marriage to his mother's elder sister.

It was while attached to XV Corps Headquarters in the summer of 1916 that Birley painted the trench sign *Tattenham Corner* (fig. 6) – an evocation of race horses thundering past the sharp turn at Epsom on Derby Day.

In January 1917, Birley was promoted to the rank of Captain and transferred to the Intelligence Corps. He was posted to the headquarters of the First Army – commanded by his uncle, now Lieutenant-General Henry Horne (he had been promoted after Field Marshal Douglas Haig, 1st Earl Haig believed he had done well at the Battle of the Somme). Birley focussed on making maps and models of positions to be assaulted by First Army troops.⁷ Later in 1917, preparing for an attack to capture the German-held city of Lens, Birley joined a flight of two-seater Bristol F.2 Fighters at the disposal of the First Army's Commander of Royal Artillery.⁸

He flew over 40 missions in the rear observer's seat of one of the aircraft, taking photographs and making simplified sketches of enemy gun batteries to be shelled and neutralised by British guns immediately prior to the British and Dominion Infantries' commitment to an assault – a technique known as counter-battery fire. In December 1917, Birley was recommended for a Military Cross for the sustained coolness under fire and effectiveness as a rear seat observer he had displayed while attached to the flight of Bristol Fighters.⁹ The medal was awarded in January 1918 and Birley thereafter treasured the initials MC that followed his name.

Restarting a career

Birley was freed from the Army late in March 1919; and it was then a question of trying to revive an artistic career that had been largely in abeyance for four years. It would seem he was soon in touch with fellow Académie students Kelly and Philpot with an idea that



Fig. 7



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

Fig. 9 Oswald Birley, *Clare Sheridan*, 1919, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, whereabouts unknown.

Fig. 10 Oswald Birley, *Glyn Philpot*, 1920, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 74.9 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Fig. 11 Sir Peter Lely, *Elizabeth, Countess of Kildare*, 1679, oil on canvas, 123.4 x 100 cm, Tate Britain, London.

they should exhibit together in America. He had encountered some senior American military officers in Paris earlier in 1919 and been struck by how much money they seemingly had to throw about. London appeared rather battered and diminished after the war; America held out the hope of being a land of plenty and promise. Birley was soon back to painting the fashionable young and female, such as debutante Muriel Gore in an expensive Fortuny dress (fig. 7).

After painting a portrait of the daughter of gallery-owner Philip Agnew, Birley was invited to hold an exhibition at his gallery in October 1919. The 26 exhibits combined some of his best pre-war work, of which he was particularly proud: such as *The Rag Sorter* (cat. 1), *An Interior at James Pryde's* (cat. 7) and a benignly thoughtful *Lord Knutsford* (fig. 8), alongside more recent portraits of the spirited sculptor *Clare Sheridan* (fig. 9) and Hazel, Lady Lavery, the beautiful Irish-American wife of Birley's old friend Sir John Lavery. The critic of *The Times* was full of praise for Birley's work (as were many other critics) but preferred to focus on those in power – the 'great and the good' – and, on that basis, came to the simplistic conclusion that Birley was 'evidently the man to paint the face' of the 'English governing classes... his portraits are very like the truth, yet not quite true'.¹⁰

America and Rhoda

The joint exhibition Birley held with Kelly and Philpot (fig. 10) in New York in June 1921 at Knoedler on Fifth Avenue was widely judged a success by the local press.¹¹ At the time, Birley (cat. 9) was not able to afford to stay in New York, but the show had brought him to the attention of appreciative American art critics and, more to the point, had caught the eye of the immensely influential art dealer and art world power broker Sir Joseph Duveen (1869–1939).

By the spring of 1921, Birley was emerging as one of the portrait painters one had to be painted by if seeking to make an entrance into British society. One of his friends was fellow portrait painter Olive Snell (1887–1962), whom he painted in 1922 (cat. 14) in a manner reminiscent of Sir Peter Lely (fig. 11). Snell's husband, Major Ebenezer Pike

Fig. 12 Oswald Birley, *Robert Lecky 'Piko' Pike*, 1922, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Private Collection.

Fig. 14 The studio overlooking the garden of the Corner House, 62 Wellington Road, St. John's Wood, London NW8, c. 1920s.

Fig. 15 Oswald Birley, *John Pierpont Morgan II*, 1923, oil on canvas, 146.1 x 116.8 cm, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York.

(1884–1965), an Anglo-Irish Guards Officer (cat. 26), had a younger sister, Rhoda, (1900–81), whose father Robert – known as 'Piko' (fig. 12) – was keen for her to be noticed in London society. Birley produced a haunting portrait of Rhoda (cat. 11), widely acknowledged as one of the London society beauties of 1921, which references the grave and dignified portrait by Velázquez in the Wallace Collection (fig. 13). Birley fell for Rhoda; she reciprocated; and they were married in London in September 1921.

Triumph in Manhattan

Early in 1922, Birley painted a portrait of American millionaire George W Elkins in the old studio he was still using on Grove End Road – a new studio home at 62 Wellington Road was being remodelled and partially rebuilt by young and rising architect Clough Williams-Ellis. This would not be habitable until the spring of 1923 (fig. 14).

Elkins was so delighted with the portrait that he invited Birley to come to America with Rhoda, to paint his wife and two daughters at their mansion in Philadelphia. In November 1922, Birley and Rhoda set sail for New York on the Cunard-White Star Line ocean liner *RMS Aquitania*. They stayed in what to a British person at the time would have been the immensely tall 18-storey Plaza Hotel, just around the corner from the Duveen Galleries. Birley visited Duveen, who announced that he had been so taken with what Birley had exhibited in New York in 1921 that he was prepared to give him a small show in his gallery in January 1923.

Birley's small show of 11 paintings, *Portraits By Oswald Birley*, at the Duveen Galleries at 56th Street and 720 Fifth Avenue was given excellent reviews by the local art press. Duveen had also 'lined up' an immense list of sitters to be painted by Birley, including the head of one of the most powerful banks in America, John Pierpont Morgan II (fig. 15) and the dour, lugubrious, United States Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon (fig. 16). Birley was praised for having made the glacial and undemonstrative Mellon appear human. The sitter is depicted accompanied by a beautifully rendered Chinese porcelain frog on the table – an indication that Mellon was an art collector as well as a giant of finance.



Fig. 13 Diego Velázquez, *The Lady with a Fan*, 1640, oil on canvas, 95 x 70 cm, The Wallace Collection, London.



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

Fig. 16 Oswald Birley, *Treasury Secretary Andrew W. Mellon*, 1923, oil on canvas, 127 x 102 cm, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

Fig. 17 Oswald Birley, *Henry Edwards Huntington*, 1924, oil on canvas, 127 x 102 cm, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Collection, San Marino, California.

Fig. 18 Oswald Birley, *Arabella Huntington*, 1924, oil on canvas, 127 x 102 cm, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Collection, San Marino, California.

Birley and Rhoda returned to London in late May 1923. They had been away from the United Kingdom for over seven months and Birley had painted over 30 portraits. He speculated anxiously to his wife that he might have been forgotten in London society; this was not at all the case, and commissions cascaded in.

Early the following year, Birley and Rhoda returned to New York. In February 1924, after arrangements had been made by Duveen, they travelled to San Marino, California, to paint Henry Edwards Huntington (fig. 17) and his formidable wife Arabella (fig. 18). Huntington was so pleased with his portrait – destined for the planned library and museum to bear his name – that he asked Birley to paint a copy for his New York residence.

The two portraits were completed by 10 March and then rushed to New York to be included in Birley's second exhibition *Portraits by Oswald Birley*, held 20 March–3 April 1924 at the Duveen Galleries (35 exhibits in total). One American critic writing in *American Art News* in March 1924 admired both Huntington portraits: 'you see here the man who could strive to make money in order that he could spend million on millions for paintings and rare books. Mr. Birley's picture... is an historical document for which the nation is deeply indebted.'¹²

The critic of the *New York Times* wrote that Birley was quite a find:

'Birley paints materials with an astonishing accuracy. Cloth of gold, chiffon, coats or ties become something one would like to order for oneself were they not, of course, of a kind far too expensive. They are always perfectly fitting to the occasion, day or evening and beautifully fitted to the person. The heads themselves and the hands are made with the same amazingly skilful realism.'¹³

New York and Palm Beach

In mid-November 1924, Birley and Rhoda returned to New York, this time staying at the Madison Hotel on East 58th Street. Birley painted a series of portraits suggested by Duveen. By Christmas, Duveen was urging Birley to travel with Rhoda to Palm Beach, Florida, in January 1925; according to Duveen, between January and March every year, Florida was where the wealthy liked to flock.



Fig. 18

By mid-January 1925, they were staying at the exclusive Everglades Club on Worth Avenue, Palm Beach, as guests of another of Duveen's contacts, the multi-millionaire Paris Singer of the Singer Sewing Machine empire. Birley took a room at nearby hotel The Breakers to use as a makeshift studio and, early in February 1925, held a small exhibition of 15 portraits at the Whitehall Hotel – the former palatial home of Henry Flagler, the 'father of Palm Beach', until his death in 1913.

In mid-February 1925, Birley wrote to Duveen in New York:

'The show has been a great success – 15 pictures in all. Practically everyone in Palm Beach who matters has seen it and there has been very genuine appreciation... We are having a truly wonderful time here – what with golf, tennis, swimming and going out trying to catch large sharks and sail fish in the fast motor launches that can go about 40 miles an hour. It's by far the nicest place I've ever been in and more delightful people.'¹⁴

In mid-March 1925, the *New York Times* reported that: 'Mr and Mrs Edward F. Hutton left a week ago aboard their yacht *Hussar* for a weekend cruise to the Bahamas taking with them as guests Mr and Mrs Oswald Birley and Mr and Mrs Harris Hammond.' The *Hussar V* at the time was the largest private yacht in the world.

A few days later, Birley wrote to Duveen:

'As far as our plans are concerned, it is difficult to say anything very definite. I have so much work in prospect that it is just a question whether it will be painted here, or in New York on our return. So far I have practically completed four portraits: Thompson [a millionaire Chicagoan who owned a chain of restaurants in the city], Harris Hammond, Mrs Harris Hammond and Mrs Douglas Gibbons. Those still to be done are: Mrs Sloane, Edward Hutton, Mrs Hutton's two children, and Hutton's niece Paris Ginger... As you see there is enough to keep me busy for some time. We had a marvellous trip on the yacht, left Miami on 7th March and came into a terrific storm in the Gulf Stream so that we could not get into Nassau Harbour till Monday. We stayed there two days and then sailed down to Havana. Very quaint and interesting.'¹⁵

He and Rhoda returned to New York in mid-April 1925, and then sailed to England towards the end of May. Duveen had been hoping that Birley would return to New York in December 1925; however, by the end of the first week of the month, he had yet to appear. Birley wrote to explain:

'Dear Joe, I am afraid you will have thought me very unenterprising not to have burnt my boats and immediately sailed for New York but if you could see the state of the studio at the present moment I know you will understand and appreciate the difficulty I am in. First of all let me say how much I appreciate the fact that you want me to do these commissions when New York, at the moment, is full of foreign painters.'

His departure was then delayed by baby Maxime falling ill from bronchitis, which quickly developed into pneumonia. For a week, it was touch and go whether Maxime would survive. On New Year's Eve 1925, Birley wrote to Duveen:

'My Dear Joe, We have been through days of very great anxiety over our small daughter who started bronchitis on Christmas Day to be followed by pneumonia two days ago... she is holding her own well... I think I told you last year that [the banker] Horace Harding had approached me last winter about painting the portrait of the President of Mexico. In June [1925] he wrote me that this was probably washed out owing to unfriendly relations between Mexico and the States. A few days ago, however, he cabled me asking whether I would be prepared to go to Mexico City at the end of February, or the beginning of March, to which I replied "yes".'¹⁶



Fig. 19 Oswald Birley, *Plutarco Elias Calles, President of Mexico*, 1926, oil on canvas, dimensions and whereabouts unknown.

Birley and Rhoda sailed for New York in mid-January 1926. Rhoda remained in Manhattan while Birley travelled to Chicago to paint another sitter suggested by Duveen. Birley returned to New York and took the train to Palm Beach.¹⁷ At the end of March, he and Rhoda took their own personal train, provided by Horace Harding, to Mexico City where, early in April 1926, Birley painted 'the wonderfully sinister' (as Rhoda put it) President of the Mexican Republic Plutarco Elías Calles (1877–1945) (fig. 19), who revelled in the nickname his authoritarian tendencies had earned him: 'El Jefe Maximo'.¹⁸

Birley and Rhoda returned to London towards the end of June 1926. Birley was keen to complete works such as the portrait of Lord Lloyd, the British High Commissioner, for exhibition with the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in November of that year. Lloyd also encouraged him to visit India, a prospect that greatly appealed to Birley and Rhoda. Lloyd provided him with several letters of introduction and Birley was reassured he would have a friendly welcome from George Goschen, 2nd Viscount Goschen (1866–1952), Governor of Madras (April 1924–June 1929), whom Birley had painted in 1921 and whose daughter Cecily he had painted the following year.

First experience of India

Birley and Rhoda set sail for Bombay (now Mumbai), from Marseille on 18 December 1926.¹⁹ They arrived early in January 1927 and were both immediately bowled over by the heat and the overpowering sights and sounds of the subcontinent. Birley hired a private first-class railway carriage that was attached to an express train bound for Madras (now Chennai), where he and his wife would stay at Government House as guests of Lord and Lady Goschen (cat. 19). Rhoda's diaries for the period of January–March 1927 suggest she spent much of her time in India trying to keep in the shade with a cool drink in easy reach. Birley was usually up early, between 5am and 6am, for a hunting expedition in the interior of Madras Province. If not hunting in the morning, he would persuade either Lord Goschen or his wife Lady Charlotte to sit for a portrait. In the afternoons, Birley and Rhoda would venture into the countryside in an official car complete with a chauffeur and a couple of cavalymen for protection.

Early in February, Birley wrote to Duveen from Madras: 'Am very busy working but the heat and the intense glare of the sun make it very difficult. Between 12 and 4 pm it is almost impossible to work at all!'²⁰

Early in March, they travelled by train to Benares (Varanasi), and after to the new imperial capital of Delhi. There, they were introduced to the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, whom Birley would later be commissioned to paint. After a few days in Delhi, they moved on to Agra to inspect the Taj Mahal; Rhoda noted that evening that Birley had been: 'entranced by the Taj by moonlight'. She preferred 'sitting in the garden' and afterwards enjoying an excellent dinner of 'bacon and eggs'.²¹ Towards the end of March, they returned to Bombay and took ship to Egypt, where they stayed for a week as guests of Lord Lloyd in Cairo. Before sailing for France and home, Birley arranged a week in Jerusalem and Palestine, places he informed Duveen he had 'always wanted to see'.²²

Only two months after his return to London, in July 1927, Birley received a welcome commission from Lord Kenyon of the National Museum Wales, Cardiff, to paint a former President of the Museum's Council: Lord Pontypridd (fig. 20) (President 1907–12). He then agreed to paint a series of other Past Presidents of the Museum's Council at a specially discounted rate (one third of his usual fee of 300 guineas for a



Fig. 20 Oswald Birley, *Lord Pontypridd*, 1927, oil on canvas, 92.5 x 71.3 cm, National Museum Wales, Cardiff.



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24

Fig. 21 Oswald Birley, *Sir William Reardon Smith*, 1930, oil on canvas, 91.7 x 71.5 cm, National Museum Wales, Cardiff.

Fig. 22 Oswald Birley, *Joseph E. Widener*, 1928, oil on canvas, 184.2 x 133.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

half-length portrait).²³ Lord Kenyon was evidently very taken by Birley's charm and willingness to please and arranged in August 1927 for him to undertake an even more prestigious commission: a portrait of King George V (1865–1936) to acknowledge that the King had laid the foundation stone for the Museum's new building in June 1912 and cut the ribbon officially opening the edifice to the public in April 1927.²⁴ When Kenyon informed Lord Cromer, the Lord Chamberlain, of the Museum's choice of artist to paint the King, Cromer was pleased and relieved, replying 'I know Oswald Birley as a fine artist + a nice fellow, so I am glad you have selected him.'²⁵

Between 1927 and 1931, Birley painted six past presidents of the council of the National Museum Wales. It may be revealing that the two sitters he most enjoyed meeting, Lord Pontypridd and Sir William Reardon-Smith (fig. 21), and whose portraits proved the most distinguished and appealing, were both self-made men who had risen to positions of eminence from very humble beginnings. Birley had been particularly impressed with Reardon-Smith, who had started life as an ordinary seaman, risen to captaining a Clipper sailing ship and retired owning a large part of Cardiff Docks. Reardon-Smith, in his old uniform as a Clipper captain, had appealed to Birley for his 'splendid Conradian qualities'.²⁶

Annus mirabilis, 1928

Work on the portrait of King George V had to be delayed owing to pressure of the King's commitments, which precluded sufficient time for the five or six hour-long sittings Birley thought he would require.²⁷ In the meantime, Birley was delighted to be asked to begin a commission he had first been asked to undertake by the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in June 1923: a portrait of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin (1867–1947) (cat. 23). The Prime Minister finally sat for Birley at 62 Wellington Road and then at 10 Downing Street early in January 1928. It was an experience both artist and sitter seemed greatly to have enjoyed; Baldwin found Birley a 'most engaging personality',²⁸ while the artist was in awe of the Prime Minister.

Baldwin's portrait was hardly finished when Birley and Rhoda left for New

Fig. 23 Oswald Birley, *James Walter Carter*, 1930, oil on canvas, The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

Fig. 24 Oswald Birley, *Margaret W. Carter*, 1930, oil on canvas, The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

York, as Duveen had offered him another exhibition – his third at the Duveen Galleries on Fifth Avenue – *Oswald Birley: Recent Studies and Portraits*. This opened in March 1928 to almost universally fulsome reviews. The *New York Times* thought 'Mr. Birley appears as a talented technician who never seems to make a mistake' and was particularly impressed by his 'imposing' portrait of leading financier and art collector Joseph Widener which caught both his 'shyness' and 'determined character' (fig. 22).²⁹ Duveen had provided him with another long list of wealthy American clients who, he maintained, were clamouring to be painted by Birley. Though he worked quickly, even Birley could not paint them all before he and Rhoda returned to the UK.

For some years afterwards, even after the Wall Street Crash of October 1929, Birley painted American millionaires who had made the pilgrimage to 62 Wellington Road, such as the West Virginia coal magnate James Walter Carter (fig. 23) – who wished to be painted as though he were a Georgian landowner of the late-18th century sitting to Reynolds or Romney – and his wife Margaret, whom Birley evidently enjoyed painting in the age of flapper chic, complemented by delicately rendered peacock feathers (fig. 24).

Birley and Rhoda arrived back in London in mid-May 1928. A fortnight later, on 2 June 1928, King George V gave him the first of four sittings lasting one and a half hours at Buckingham Palace. Birley found his sitter a 'little hard going at first' but the King thawed and became much more talkative as they discussed the intricacies of shooting driven pheasants, as opposed to the more challenging woodcock, clearly the King's preference.

The King gave Birley a last sitting at the end of June 1928. Nearly two months later, the completed work, framed according to the artist's specifications, arrived at Buckingham Palace for the King to inspect (cat. 24). His Majesty objected to the amount of grey in his beard but relented when his Private Secretary Frederick 'Fritz' Ponsonby referred him to a mirror – the artist had only painted what he saw before him and the fact was the King did look somewhat beyond his years. With daily exposure, the King warmed to the portrait to the extent that he insisted it be exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1929, where it was much admired by the press.³⁰



Fig. 25



Fig. 26

When the portrait was finally delivered to the National Museum Wales in September 1929 and installed in the Museum's Court Room, the Director Dr Cyril Fox wrote to Birley to express how pleased he was with the painting, which he described as a 'magnificent achievement. . . [which] studied in isolation impresses one even more that it did at the Academy as an admirable and vivid presentation of the Man'.³¹

The King and I: A visit to Siam

Early in January 1929, Birley and Rhoda set sail for Bangkok to paint the King of Siam, King Rama VII of the House of Chakri (1893–1941). The last absolute monarch of that country, he was compelled to abdicate in March 1935. One of Birley's American millionaire admirers/sitters had apparently first mooted the commission in February 1928. As Birley wrote to Duveen early in February 1929, he had arrived in Bangkok early in January and had:

'started at once on my work: first of all two big standing full-lengths of the King and the Queen who are, however, only just five feet high! Then a picture after my own heart of the King in full Coronation robes, crown etc on his throne (fig. 25): a marvellous arrangement of Oriental colours. I did a huge canvas and the King is so thrilled with it that he insisted on my sending it to the Royal Academy in London where I hope you will see it. Although of course it's difficult to judge if anything in these strange surroundings and difficult light. I feel it is one of the best things I've ever done. . . We are nearly at the end of our time here and I am not sorry as working in this hothouse atmosphere and blinding light is very trying and tiring'.³²

They left Bangkok towards the end of February 1929, stopping off en route to England, 'chiefly to see the Ajanta Caves and the early paintings, which I know only from reproductions', as Birley explained to Duveen. In March, during a brief trip north of Calcutta (now Kolkata) to the princely state of Cooch Behar, Birley painted on his own initiative an attractive portrait of the state's formidable and beautiful Maharani Regent Indira Devi Sahiba (fig. 26). Maxime later suspected her father had rather fallen for the 'siren of Cooch Behar'.³³

Fig. 25 Oswald Birley, *King Rama VII of Siam/Thailand*, 1929, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Royal Museum, Bangkok.

Fig. 26 Oswald Birley, *The Maharanee of Cooch Behar*, 1929, oil on canvas, dimensions and whereabouts unknown.

Fig. 27 Oswald Birley, *Mohandas Karamchand Mahatma Gandhi*, 1931, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Central Hall, Lok Sabha, Parliament of India, New Delhi.



Fig. 27

An encounter with Gandhi

It was while in India in 1929, returning from Thailand, that Birley and Rhoda first encountered the phenomenal popularity of Mohandas Karamchand 'Mahatma' Gandhi (1869–1948). Later interviewed by Maxime, Rhoda's maid Jackson, or 'Jacky', recalled:

'some time in March we were approaching one station when the train suddenly stopped. It was overflowing with hundreds of Indians who covered the tracks. . . we were just three white people among so many Indians. Their bearer told them the Indians were all waiting for someone called Gandhi who was on a much smaller train behind ours. . . we had never heard of him but Oswald had heard of him and wanted to paint a portrait of him'.³⁴

In November 1931, Birley was commissioned to paint Gandhi by the Chief Minister of Gujarat Sir Prabhashankar Pattani (1862–1938). Birley sketched Gandhi in London during the Second Round Table Conference (October–November 1931) at the same time as the Mahatma sat for Birley's friend and sculptor Clare Sheridan for a bust (fig. 27).³⁵

Birley submitted the portrait to the Royal Academy for inclusion in its summer exhibition of May 1932. As the *New York Times* reported, the portrait was initially approved by the Selection Committee but was suddenly overruled by the Academy's Council. President of the Academy Sir William Llewellyn claimed 'there was no political motive behind the rejection [and] repudiated any notion that Government influence had anything to do with the Academy's decision'.³⁶

Pattani took the portrait back to India in 1935. However, he died three years later as he was about to leave for a trip to meet with Gandhi and present him with the portrait. The painting would eventually be displayed with great ceremony inside the new Indian Constituent Assembly in late August 1947, only a fortnight after India's formal independence from British rule.



Fig. 28



Fig. 29

Fig. 28 Oswald Birley, *King George V as Senior Bencher of Lincoln's Inn*, 1934, oil on canvas, 165 x 113 cm, Lincoln's Inn, London.

Fig. 29 Oswald Birley, *King George V*, c. 1933-34, oil on canvas, 59.1 x 42.9 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Fig. 30 Oswald Birley, *Sir Ernest Rutherford*, 1932, oil on canvas, 154 x 104 cm, The Royal Society, London.

The King and I: Birley as royal portraitist

By 1930, Birley had emerged as one of the British portrait painters of the day to approach to undertake a prestigious commission – alongside Augustus John (made increasingly unreliable through deepening alcoholism) and an ailing Sir William Orpen (who would die in September 1931). After the widely perceived success of his portrait of King George V for the National Museum Wales, a veritable queue formed of other organisations who wanted Birley to paint them a portrait of the King. First, the Royal Yacht Squadron in Cowes (1930), then the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (1932), the Royal Regiment of Artillery (1933), Lincoln's Inn in London (1933–34) (fig. 28), followed by the Royal Fusiliers (1934). By the last named commission, the King had grown tired of repeated sittings for Birley and other artists and suggested Birley create his full-length portrait from a study of his head that the artist could make from one two-hour sitting (fig. 29).

During this period (1932–34) Birley also painted a series of striking and well-received portraits of scientists such as *Sir Ernest Rutherford* for the Royal Society, London (fig. 30), academics such as *Professor Lionel Curtis* for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, and a dynamic *Sir John Reith* as Director-General of the British Broadcasting Corporation (fig. 31), who appears as if he cannot abide remaining seated any longer and wishes to spring up and into action (Reith was grateful to Birley for having deftly concealed major damage to the left side of his face caused by a German sniper's bullet during the Battle of Loos in October 1915).³⁷

'Heaven in Sussex': Life at Charleston Manor

Early in 1934, Birley and Rhoda, with Maxime and young son Mark (born in 1930), were able to stay for the first time in a new summer 'country hideaway': Charleston Manor, near West Dean in East Sussex. Birley had bought the 20-room property – complete with stables, a barn, a Norman-era dovecote and a walled orchard – from Lady Lloyd, the wife of a friend, for £3,000 late in October 1931.³⁸

Charleston became his weekend retreat from the clamour of life in London during the summer months from *circa* 1933 onwards; and during late summer/early



Fig. 30

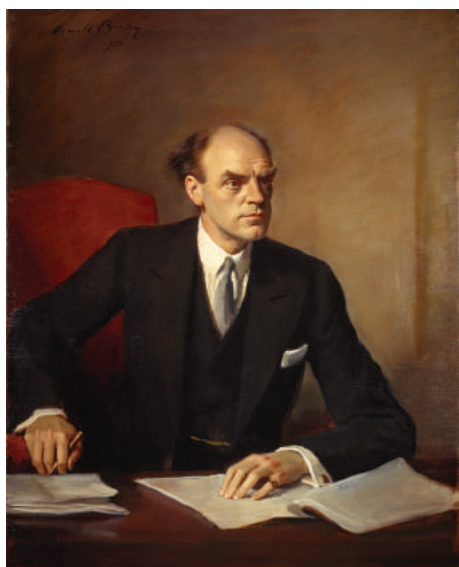


Fig. 31

Fig. 31 Oswald Birley, *Sir John Reith*, 1934, oil on canvas, 128 x 103 cm, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Fig. 32 Oswald Birley, *Conversation Piece (The Windsor Wets)*, 1934–36, oil on canvas, Royal Collection, Windsor Castle.

Fig. 33 Oswald Birley, *John Henry Manners, 9th Duke of Rutland*, 1936, oil on canvas, Belvoir Castle, Leicestershire.



Fig. 32

autumn, when not staying in a villa he rented at Beauvallon-sur-Mer on the Côte d'Azur, near what was then the tiny fishing village of St Tropez.³⁹ For Birley, Charleston quickly became his 'little portion of heaven in Sussex'. Rhoda was not so enamoured with the place; soon after her first visit, she became convinced Charleston was haunted: 'her bedclothes were stripped from her body many nights by invisible and hostile hands'.⁴⁰

More royal connections

Birley and Rhoda still entertained regularly at 62 Wellington Road during the 1930s. One particularly welcome guest from 1934–36 was the vivacious Duchess of York – the future Queen Elizabeth (1900–2002). Birley had been commissioned in the early spring of 1934 to paint the Duchess as Honorary Colonel-in-Chief of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. The Duchess and Duke of York (the future King George VI (1895–1952)) were both very taken with the portrait Birley had painted at Windsor Castle.

The Duchess of York appears to have enjoyed Birley's company and jumped at the idea proposed by the courtier Sir Richard Molyneux that he paint a group portrait or 'conversation piece' in honour of the 'Windsor Wets' – a semi-secret, initially entirely light-hearted society dedicated to sampling fine wines from the Castle's vaults. The Duchess was its honoured patron.⁴¹

It took Birley almost two years to complete *Conversation Piece (The Windsor Wets)* (fig. 32), as it took him some time to secure sittings with the core members of the society. The Duke of Rutland, however, was so pleased with the project that he commissioned a separate half-length portrait of himself from Birley, which caused a stir when exhibited with the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in November–December 1936, where he was widely perceived as the epitome of self-assured, aristocratic elegance (fig. 33).

The Wets had three female members by autumn 1934, but etiquette dictated it would not be seemly for them actually to attend dinners. In *Conversation Piece*, the Duchess of York as patron is represented by her portrait, which hangs on the back panelled wall that dominates the composition. She is flanked to her right by her husband



Fig. 33



Fig. 34

Fig. 34 Oswald Birley, *Conversation Piece – At Printing House Square*, 1937, oil on canvas, Times International.



Fig. 35

Fig. 35 Oswald Birley, *Maxime Birley*, 1937, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Private Collection.

the Duke, wearing evening dress and decorations, and to her left by the Duchess of Beaufort. Peeping flirtatiously around a screen on the left hand side is the third female member of the Wets, the beautiful Countess of Eldon.

A rebuff from the Royal Academy

Perhaps it was linked to his spat with the Royal Academy over the barred portrait of Gandhi in April 1932, but Birley was never elected an Associate, despite coming close at least four times between March 1934 and April 1939.⁴²

Meanwhile, there was never a shortage of interesting and diverting guests to entertain, and sometimes paint, at Charleston Manor. Among celebrities of the day staying for long weekends at Charleston – where they were guaranteed delicious meals sometimes cooked by Birley, with more experimental and eccentric menus contributed by Rhoda – were Osbert Sitwell, Lord David Cecil, Sir Philip Sassoon, Sir Edward Marsh, Cecil Beaton and Rex Whistler, one of the few younger contemporary artists for whom Birley had any time.

By the late 1930s, Birley was trying to exhibit a greater variety of portraiture at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters. Images of the powerful and the fashionable were joined by the occasional group portrait or conversation piece such as *At Printing House Square* (fig. 34) alongside depictions of his beloved daughter Maxime (fig. 35) and superb ‘character studies’, such as that of his old Nanny (fig. 36), who ended her days as part of the staff at Charleston, though without any specific duties apart from looking after Birley’s many dogs, as shown in a photograph from 1937 (fig. 37).

Perhaps Birley was aware that the perception of him – which had, understandably, grown over the years – as a ‘courtier’ painter to the British Royal Family might not necessarily have been to the advantage of his overall critical reputation. Late in 1938, he almost seemed relieved when he learned that the Royal Veterinarian Society (RVS) had decided to ask Philip de László to paint a portrait of King George VI as their patron. However, de László, in poor health, then died and Birley was asked by the RVS and the Royal Agricultural Society of England to paint the King in April 1939



Fig. 36

Fig. 36 Oswald Birley, *Nannie Trickett*, 1937, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 81.2 cm, Private Collection.



Fig. 37

Fig. 37 Oswald Birley, Nannie Trickett and ‘Raggles’, Charleston Manor, c. 1937.

for looming centenary occasions. He, of course, readily agreed; whatever his concerns as to his artistic reputation, he still deemed it an immense privilege as well as a duty to undertake such portraits, even if he might have been happier to focus on producing evocative portraits of sinuously exotic and graceful ballet dancers (cat. 32).

The 1930s appeared to be ending on a high note for Birley: in mid-July 1939, he was awarded a Gold Medal by the French National Salon for his contribution to French cultural life since before the First World War (as the British champion of the caricaturist Sem (cat. 12)).⁴³

However, as Maxime later recalled, when present in the Long Room at Charleston on the morning of 3 September 1939 to hear Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain sorrowfully declare that Britain was again at war with Germany, she was surprised to see her ‘father’s face... streaked with the only tears [she]... ever s[aw] him shed... nibbl[ing] his moustache ... a clear sign he was agitated’.⁴⁴

The world at war again

Birley was soon writing to his influential contacts in an effort to find a place for himself in the nation’s war effort – despite the fact that, at 59, he was far over the regulation age for active military service. As the Battle of Britain was reaching its height in the skies over south-eastern England, Birley was eventually approached by Sir Kenneth Clark’s War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC) of the Ministry of Information in mid-August 1940 to work on a short-term basis as an official artist attached to the Royal Air Force.⁴⁵ It would seem the Chief of the Air Staff Sir Cyril Newall had put in a word for Birley, as he had been very much impressed by the artist’s recent portrait of the aircraft manufacturer and pioneer of aircraft design *Sir Geoffrey de Havilland* (fig. 38).

Birley accepted the offer even though he was already very busy as a Captain and a Company Commander in the Sussex Home Guard, which he had promptly joined when the creation of the organisation (then known as the Local Defence Volunteers) was announced by Secretary of State for War Anthony Eden on 14 May 1940.

Between November 1940 and June 1941, Birley painted seven portraits for

Fig. 38 Oswald Birley, *Sir Geoffrey de Havilland*, 1940, oil on canvas, 127 x 102 cm, Private Collection.

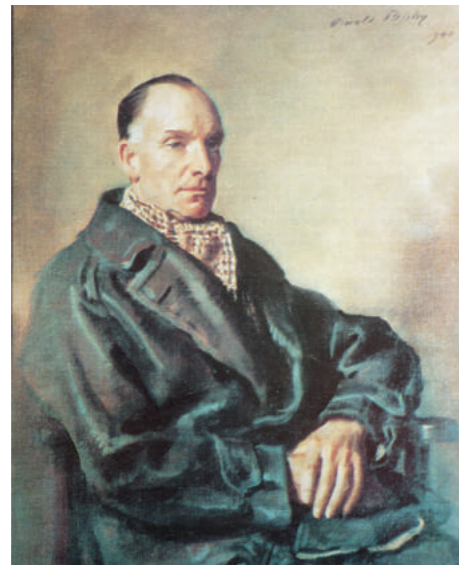


Fig. 38



Fig. 39

the Air Ministry and the WAAC; they were nearly all senior officers. The Air Ministry was pleased with Birley's work; in fact, many in the Ministry appeared to prefer his portraits of senior RAF officers to the more unsparingly realist images produced by the full time war artist allotted to them by the WAAC, Eric Kennington.⁴⁶ Sir Kenneth Clark, however, did not take the hint and, when Birley's contract expired towards the end of July 1941, it was not renewed.

A change in vision

Birley returned to his Home Guard duties. He was regarded as a good leader, so much so that, upon his return, he was promoted from command of a company to that of a sector and from Captain to Major. His sector was also chosen for deployment of a new anti-tank weapon, a fearsome-looking device called the Blacker Bombard, which its operators quickly discovered was more of a threat to them than the enemy. Birley learned this for himself on the afternoon of 15 October 1941 when he was supervising a demonstration of the Bombard: a 20-pound, highly-explosive bomb from the weapon detonated immediately on being fired, and all those standing nearby were riddled with bomb fragments. Two of Birley's men were killed, the Inspector General's Aide lost his jaw and Birley was hit in both eyes. The damage to his right eye was so serious that it had to be removed in hospital later that day.

For a while, there were fears that the sight in his remaining eye had been affected. However, the left eye responded to treatment and Birley was soon declaring that it would not be long before he was painting portraits again and that they would be better than ever. Maxime later recalled that her father was: 'soon trying to paint with one eye, the empty socket covered with a patch... At first he had little sense of the distance between brush and canvas and his flesh tones were so red that his sitters all looked as if congested with high blood pressure.'⁴⁷

Perhaps tellingly, one of the first portraits he painted after his accident with which he was satisfied to the extent he exhibited it with the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in November 1942 was an affecting and poignant self-portrait (fig. 39) – the

Fig. 40 Oswald Birley, *Lawrence Dundas, 2nd Marquess of Zetland*, 1943, oil on canvas, Royal Geographical Society, London.



Fig. 40

Fig. 41 Oswald Birley, *Lady Diana Montgomery-Massingberd*, 1943, oil on canvas, 88 x 69 cm, Gunby Hall, Lincolnshire.



Fig. 41

only one he ever painted in which he is wearing spectacles, which skilfully obscure the damage to the right side of his face and the fact that he had lost his right eye entirely.

Another dimension to the 'People's War'

Later that year, Birley went on to paint two fine images of youthful aristocratic British military masculinity: Lieutenant Sir Anthony Meyer (cat. 34) and Lieutenant the Earl of Euston (cat. 35). It was as if he wished to highlight that the British aristocracy was making a contribution to a conflict the Ministry of Information was at pains to describe as the 'People's War'. Elsewhere, he painted portraits of more elderly aristocrats who, in their own way, continued loyally to serve the wider community, such as the 2nd Marquess of Zetland, a past Secretary of State for India and President of the Royal Geographical Society (fig. 40) and the impressively dignified owner of Gunby Hall, *Lady Diana Montgomery-Massingberd* (fig. 41).

In April 1944, Birley had another opportunity to offer support to a long-established British institution with his brush. The Commandant of the Royal Naval College at Greenwich, Captain Augustus Agar VC, asked Birley if he would paint a posthumous portrait of the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound. Birley readily agreed and then suggested he paint a whole series of Admirals at a discounted rate for the College Officer's Mess. He further proposed a portrait of King George VI as an Admiral of the Fleet to hang in pride of place – given that King George had, in July 1939, officially opened the new Mess.⁴⁸ The King was (understandably) busy and sittings could not be arranged until November 1944, but they resulted in one of Birley's most impressive and moving portraits of a British sovereign (fig. 42). The King, seriously underweight, appears gaunt and careworn but also resilient, kindly and steadfast. Indeed, the King was so impressed with the portrait painted for the College that he gave Birley an additional three sittings to paint a slightly different copy to hang at Windsor Castle for his own personal pleasure.⁴⁹



Fig. 42



Fig. 43

Fig. 42 Oswald Birley, *King George VI*, 1944, oil on canvas, 125 x 100 cm, The Crown Estate.
Fig. 43 Oswald Birley, *Winston Churchill MP*, 1946, oil on canvas, 76 x 64 cm, Parliamentary Art Collection, UK.

Portraiture in an austere age

Throughout the last year of the Second World War, there was little sign that Birley's career had been in any way impeded by the Blacker Bombard accident in 1941; plentiful and invariably prestigious commissions continued to land at his door. In early January 1945, a Conservative Member of Parliament asked Birley to paint a portrait of Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874–1965) for the Speaker's House via the Speaker of the House of Commons.

As it transpired, Churchill was far too busy with running the war and attending summits with America and the Soviet Union and so could not provide Birley with sittings for the portrait until June 1946 – almost a year after his shock defeat in the General Election of July 1945, a defeat which Birley found incomprehensible (he most likely voted for Churchill).⁵⁰ When professional painter first met amateur artist and ex-Prime Minister, Churchill's daughter Mary noted that her father was a little testy with Birley. Soon, however, he warmed to the artist's urbane good manners and to discussion of Birley's fine First World War military record:

'the relationship between sitter and painter got off to a rather sticky start because Winston became awkward and did not want to be distracted from his own ploys... I have spent today chasing Papa to sit for Mr B[irley]... However, B's quiet charm and my father's respect for an artist soon melted away any difficulties and I was able to leave them to it. On my return later that day from a trip to London I found Mr. B. and Papa well-pleased with each other and the portrait.'⁵¹

Churchill gave Birley two further sittings to complete the portrait – one more than the artist had requested – as his sitter so enjoyed their conversation (fig. 43). Birley had also recently completed a magisterial portrait of probably the favourite among his Second World War Generals – the handsome, debonair, Anglo-Irish aristocrat Field Marshal Viscount Alexander of Tunis (cat. 37). Churchill was especially impressed by the skill with which Birley had painted the fur on the bulky flying jacket Alexander was wearing.



Fig. 44



Fig. 45



Fig. 46

Fig. 44 Oswald Birley *Edward Wood, 1st Earl Halifax*, 1946, oil on canvas, 132 x 106.7 cm, All Souls College, Oxford.
Fig. 45 Oswald Birley, *Hugh Percy, 10th Duke of Northumberland*, 1946, oil on canvas, 73 x 61 cm, Collection of the Duke of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle.
Fig. 46 Oswald Birley, *Elizabeth, Duchess of Northumberland*, 1947, oil on canvas, 90.8 x 69.7 cm, Collection of the Duke of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle.

Birley was rather nervous before showing the portrait of Churchill to the sitter and his wife, Clementine Churchill, whom Birley correctly identified as an even more unforgiving audience. He need not have had any anxiety on the matter; his respect for Churchill and compassion for his plight – he was still nursing the emotional wound of being rejected at the polls only a year earlier – are all too evident in the finished painting.

Birley found little respite that summer from the pressure of commissions. He just had time to attend his daughter's wedding in late July 1946 (he had asked her to postpone it by six weeks on account of work demands). After a short break at Charleston Manor, he was then off to Oxford to prepare a portrait of Churchill's former sparring partner in the Conservative Party and in government, *Lord Halifax* (fig. 44), who had recently stepped down as a successful British Ambassador to the United States. Birley knew the 'Holy Fox' of old – this would be his third portrait of him – but he found that, with the passage of time, Halifax's long face had acquired myriad lines and furrows that gave him even greater character and gravitas. The portrait, however, does not conceal the fact that one motivation for its commission was that Halifax's distinguished political career had by then effectively come to an end. Despite the Fellowship conferred upon him by All Souls College, Oxford, Halifax's air of rueful disappointment, subtly captured by Birley, is palpable.

From Oxford, Birley moved northwards to Alnwick Castle in Northumberland to paint a more youthful and stylish example of North Country aristocracy: *Hugh Percy, 10th Duke of Northumberland (1914–88) in Hunting Dress* (fig. 45). Birley and the Duke found much to admire in each other and the artist was asked back the following year to paint the Duchess (fig. 46) and other members of the ducal household.

Birley's thoughts turned to the possibility of another trip to India and a return to the 'glorious sunshine' of Palm Beach. He was never to explore an India independent of British rule when partitioned into two new countries from August 1947. However, he retained a keen interest in the politics, art and culture of the subcontinent.



Fig. 47 Oswald Birley, *General Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Commander Allied Forces in Europe*, 1951, oil on canvas, 105 x 76 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC.

Transatlantic excursions

From thoughts of India, early in 1948, Birley resumed a long-standing connection with the Cunard-White Star Line, which commissioned him to paint a large portrait of Queen Elizabeth for the main lounge of its new transatlantic liner of the same name. A brief trip to New York on the *Queen Elizabeth*, as guests of the Cunard Line in late summer of that year, whetted his and Rhoda's appetite for a longer visit to America. In New York, he had made contact with the former Mrs Edward Hutton, now calling herself Marjorie Merriweather Davies. She invited Birley and Rhoda to stay with her at her luxurious Palm Beach villa Mar-a-Lago from January–February 1949.

Final furlongs

One reason Birley had been so keen to return to Florida was that the climate seemed to suit his health, which had been in poor shape since the middle of the Second World War, when he found himself subject to recurrent attacks of bronchitis that led to spells of debilitating breathlessness. Returning to England in the late spring of 1949, they were greeted with the welcome news that Birley had been awarded a knighthood, principally due to a recommendation from Churchill.⁵²

Birley's spells of 'bronchial trouble' kept recurring, and this was likely to have prompted him to organise a retrospective exhibition of his work from the previous 50 years at the Royal Institute Galleries in May 1951. Maxime later noted her father was pleased, even relieved, by the generally favourable critical reception the exhibition was given. The verdict of *The Times* was echoed by many of the leading broadsheet critics. Birley was evidently the artist to ask 'when painting very eminent men and women [because] for the most part... [h]is likenesses are startlingly exact'.⁵³ The review concluded by complimenting Birley on his 'accomplished...landscapes, still life paintings and interiors', many of which had not been exhibited in public. This the reviewer thought a great pity, as the landscapes and still life paintings revealed a side to Birley that the public would doubtless have appreciated, alongside his many essays on the emulation of Van Dyck.⁵⁴

Once the retrospective closed, Birley and Rhoda spent some time staying with Winston and Clementine Churchill at Chartwell, which was enjoyed by all. Birley began work on a more informal half-length study of the great man looking 'rumpled but indomitable' and wearing one of his wartime blue siren suits (cat. 39).⁵⁵ Birley intended this as a Christmas present for Clementine. However, he would not finish the painting until the end of December 1951 on account of 'feeling tired and under the weather'. Even Churchill was impressed by, and concerned about, Birley's relentless and daunting work rate, and hoped he would find time to 'spare himself' to enjoy his goldfish at 62 Wellington Road.⁵⁶ However, Birley could not be persuaded to slow down. Early in September, he set off for Paris as he had managed to persuade General Dwight Eisenhower (1890–1969) to sit for him as Supreme Commander of the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This was one of Birley's occasional private initiative portraits. As ever, he worked quickly, so that the portrait was exhibited in that year's annual exhibition of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in November 1951, and was widely praised as a 'superb likeness' and a decidedly skilful essay in various 'pleasing shades of green' (fig. 47).

'A great artist has been taken from us'

The warmth of this reaction encouraged Birley to imagine exhibiting the portrait of Eisenhower alongside that of Churchill in his siren suit 'somewhere in Washington DC or New York'.⁵⁷ Churchill, who had been narrowly elected as Prime Minister in October 1951, thought this was an excellent idea that would doubtless help cement Anglo-American relations.⁵⁸ Birley was preparing to leave for America when he fell ill again and had to undergo a major operation on his chest to help with his breathing. The surgery was judged a success, and Birley and Rhoda sailed for New York on the *Queen Mary* liner towards the end of February 1952.

Returning to England in late April, Birley fell ill with a 'throat infection'. This turned into pneumonia and, as his daughter later recalled, he died on 6 May 1952 from 'flu he contracted on the way back from New York on a liner. He took to his bed at home in Wellington Road and died peacefully in his sleep – his dog lying on the floor near his bed'.⁵⁹

Rhoda understandably was distraught, but found some comfort in the many telegrams and letters of sympathy that followed. Birley's obituary notices were also extremely complimentary and admiring. According to Sir Gerald Kelly (then President of the Royal Academy), writing in *The Times*, he was 'one of the most successful portrait painters of his time... he had good ideas of arrangement and a masculine bluntness of statement that won respect'.⁶⁰

Perhaps the final epitaph should go to that consummate wordsmith Winston Churchill who, despite the many matters weighing on his mind as Prime Minister, found time to write to Rhoda:

'I cannot express to you the grief suffered in the loss of your dear Oswald, still less can I imagine your own... Of your own sorrow I cannot speak but I feel that a great artist has been taken from us whose pencil, guided by deep instinct, could discern the character of his subjects and invest their portraits with all the charm that light and colour can bestow'.⁶¹

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NOTES

- 1 At his death, Birley still owned a battered, well-thumbed copy of a first edition of Alice Meynell (ed) *The Work of John Singer Sargent*, published in London in 1903.
- 2 Federica Armiraglio, *Manet* (Rizzoli 2006), p 96.
- 3 Elaine Kilmurray and Richard Ormond (eds), *John Singer Sargent* (Tate Gallery Publishing 1998), pp 273–275.
- 4 At his death, Birley owned a luxury two-volume edition of Claude Roger-Marx's *Vuillard: His Life and Work*, published in Paris in 1945.
- 5 See *The Observer* (15 June 1913), p 4; and Bowyer Nichols in *The Burlington Magazine* (March 1915), 26(144), p 255.
- 6 *Nominations Book for Associate Membership of the Royal Academy*, February 1912, RAA/GA/11/2/3, Archives, Royal Academy, London.
- 7 *The Harrow School Register (1885–1949)* (Harrow, 1950), p 105.
- 8 David Fraser, *Alanbrooke* (Hamlyn Paperbacks 1983), p 79.
- 9 *London Gazette* (1 January 1918), clipping, Rhoda Birley Papers, Private Archive.
- 10 *The Times* (13 October 1919), p 14.
- 11 *American Art News* (11 June 1921), 19(35), p 1.
- 12 *American Art News* (22 March 1924), 22(24), p 1.
- 13 *New York Times* (13 April 1924), p 10.
- 14 Oswald Birley to Joseph Duveen, 15 February 1925, Birley Correspondence, Duveen Brothers records 1876–1981, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- 15 Oswald Birley to Sir Joseph Duveen, 19 March 1925, Birley Correspondence, Duveen Brothers records 1876–1981, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- 16 Oswald Birley to Sir Joseph Duveen, 31 December 1925, Birley Correspondence, Duveen Brothers records 1876–1981, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- 17 Oswald Birley to Sir Joseph Duveen, 9 February 1926, Birley Correspondence, Duveen Brothers records 1876–1981, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- 18 *New York Times* (7 June 1926), p 15.
- 19 Entry for 18 December 1926, Rhoda Birley Papers, Private Archive.
- 20 Oswald Birley to Sir Joseph Duveen, 8 February 1927, Birley Correspondence, Duveen Brothers records, 1878–1981, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- 21 Entry for 12 March 1927, Diary, Rhoda Birley Papers, Private Archive.
- 22 Oswald Birley to Sir Joseph Duveen, 8 February 1927, Birley Correspondence, Duveen Brothers records, 1878–1981, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- 23 Dr Cyril Fox (Director, NMW, Cardiff) to Lady Kenyon, 10 January 1928, Birley Files, Archives, NMW, Cardiff.
- 24 Secretary NMW, Cardiff to HH Lawrence (Manager, *The Western Mail*), 14 September 1929, Birley Files, Archives, NMW, Cardiff.
- 25 Oswald Birley to Dr Cyril Fox (Director, NMW, Cardiff), 24 February 1928, Birley Files, Archives, NMW, Cardiff.
- 26 At his death, Birley owned a complete set of the *Collected Works of Joseph Conrad* (1927 edition).
- 27 Lord Cromer (Lord Chamberlain to King George V) to Dr Cyril Fox (Director, NMW, Cardiff), 1 February 1928, Birley Files, Archives, NMW, Cardiff.
- 28 Sir John Ashley Mullins (Prime Warden Goldsmiths Company) to Walter Prideaux (Clerk), 21 February 1928, DB/594 – individual file on Baldwin, Library, Goldsmiths Company, London.
- 29 *New York Times* (18 March 1928), clipping, Private Archive.
- 30 *The Spectator* (10 May 1929), p 11.
- 31 Dr Cyril Fox (Director, NMW, Cardiff) to Birley, 9 September 1929, Archives, NMW, Cardiff.
- 32 Oswald Birley to Sir Joseph Duveen, from the Oriental Hotel, Bangkok, 11 February 1929, Birley Correspondence, Duveen Brothers Papers, 1878–1981, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- 33 Unpublished Reminiscences, Maxime de La Falaise, circa late 1990s, Private Archive.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Anita Leslie, *Clare Sheridan* (Doubleday, 1977), pp 269–270.
- 36 *New York Times* (21 April 1932), clipping, Rhoda Birley Papers, Private Archive.
- 37 Charlotte Higgins, *This New Noise: The Extraordinary Birth And Troubled Life Of The BBC* (Guardian Books and Faber & Faber, 2015), pp 4–5.
- 38 Entry for 25 October 1931, Diaries of Walter Hindes Godfrey (1931–1938), GOD/ACC 9446/3/10, East Sussex County Record Office.
- 39 See n 33 above.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 William Shawcross, *Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother: The Official Biography* (Macmillan, 2009), pp 338–339.
- 42 Birley was proposed, and came second or third, in the Royal Academy Associate membership elections of March 1934, February 1937, February 1939 and April 1939. RAA/OA/5/3, *Royal Academy Elections Book: 1931–1962*, Archives, Royal Academy, London.
- 43 *The Times* (15 July 1939), p 10.
- 44 See n 33 above.
- 45 E M o'R Dickey (Secretary to the WAAC) to Birley at 62 Wellington Road, NW8, 15 August 1940, Birley File, Department of Art, IWM, London.
- 46 Air Commodore Harald Peake (Air Ministry) to E M o'R Dickey, 18 February 1941, Birley File Department of Art, IWM, London.
- 47 See n 33 above.
- 48 Captain Augustus Agar (Royal Naval College, Greenwich) to Sir Alan Lascelles, 17 April 1944, PS/PSP/GVI/PS/NAVY/03812, Royal Archives, Windsor Castle.
- 49 Sir Alan Lascelles to Birley, 27 February 1945, PS/PSP/GVI/PS/NAVY/03812, Royal Archives, Windsor Castle. Birley received 500 guineas from the King for the second version of the portrait.
- 50 See n 33 above.
- 51 Mary Soames, *Winston Churchill: His Life as A Painter* (Collins, 1990), p 152.
- 52 *The Times* (9 June 1949), p 7.
- 53 *The Times*, (3 May 1951), p 6.
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 See n 33 above.
- 56 Churchill to Birley, 20 August 1951, CHUR 2/349-302, CAC, CCC.
- 57 Birley to Churchill, 29 December 1951, CHUR 2/180-295, CAC, CCC.
- 58 Churchill to Birley, 3 February 1952, CHUR 2/180-293, CAC, CCC.
- 59 Unpublished Reminiscences, Maxime de La Falaise, circa late 1990s, Private Archive.
- 60 *The Times*, (7 May 1952), p 8.
- 61 Churchill to Rhoda Birley, 12 May 1952, CHUR 2/180-286, CAC, CCC.

SIR OSWALD BIRLEY MC: THE ‘OFF-DUTY’ WORKS

Oscar Wilde said ‘*every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter*’. Although this autobiographical element is certainly true of Sir Oswald Birley – as attested by the portraits of his wife Rhoda (cat. 11) and children Maxime (cat. 27) and Mark (cat. 33) – we must remember that Birley was a professional painter. It is therefore equally important to consider the works he undertook of things that appealed to him *informally*, free from the template of human portrayal.

Birley referred to these paintings as his ‘off-duty’ works, and they can be divided into four categories: interior views, still life works, studies of architecture and landscapes. Although we are only able to include five of these works in this exhibition, we have so far found reference to 90 examples, with subjects ranging from Venetian scenes (cat. 10) to a painting of the artist’s dachshund *Remus* (whereabouts unknown). As this essay will demonstrate, these works help us to build a more complete understanding of Birley’s broader sensibilities and inquisitive eye.

One of the most remarkable paintings in this exhibition is *An Interior at James Pryde’s* (cat. 7), painted in 1914 and exhibited at the Royal Academy that year. Pryde was a fellow artist and friend of Birley, and the painting shows a room in his apartments at 3 Lansdowne House, Holland Park, where he lived prior to the First World War. The approach is ambitious in both scale and subject, and is rightly considered Birley’s most accomplished interior scene. The columns shown either side of the composition create an air of monumentality and various pictorial elements, including a lit fire and two empty chairs, one with a top hat and cane draped over it, suggest the viewer is not alone. These ambiguities seem highly relevant for a space occupied by Pryde, whose studio, according to Augustus John, ‘had the same dignified and somewhat sinister atmosphere we find in his pictures’.

Interior and domestic scenes were popular subject matter in late-19th and early-20th-century British art, and their popularity ran parallel to conceptions of cultural and moral values. With the increasing availability of printed interior design material, these once private rooms soon became outward demonstrations of good taste, while providing a backdrop for discussions on evolving social customs and gender roles. In 1914, for example, the same year Birley painted Pryde’s interior, Walter Sickert exhibited his seminal work *Ennui* (Tate, London), which shows a forlorn woman standing in an interior behind an older man who is oblivious to her isolation and boredom.

Although the narrative running through Birley’s depiction of Pryde’s interior is not as confrontational as that seen in the work of Sickert or his Camden Town Group peers, it was no less engaging for the contemporary viewer for its representation of the artist’s home. As a creative and individually-minded person, an artist’s personal interior space could be deemed a revealing extension of his personality. Pryde’s interior is thus a

Fig. 48 Oswald Birley, *The Dining Room at Charleston Manor*, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 64.8 cm, whereabouts unknown.



dwelling without a human subject – a context for its subject’s character that no orthodox portrait could achieve with the same breadth.

Birley also painted a number of views of his own interior spaces at both Charleston Manor and 62 Wellington Road and, although the latter is now lost, the surviving views of Charleston record an altogether different environment. A view of the dining room at Charleston Manor (fig. 48), shows a comfortable, middle-class interior space, with nothing but a few framed pictures to suggest the inhabitant has any artistic orientation. Birley was presenting himself not as an artist with grand ambition, but as a gentleman who has experienced considerable success.

Although Birley painted relatively few still life works, we are lucky to have in this exhibition one of his finest examples: *Still Life of a Wood Pigeon* (cat. 36). Although small in scale and seemingly incongruous with the other paintings on display, this thoughtful study of a shot pigeon, painted in 1944, deserves equal consideration. Birley



Fig. 49 Oswald Birley, *Giorgio*, 1921, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Private Collection.

was a keen shot and, between portrait commissions, would often attend shooting parties with friends in Scotland, the north of England and Ireland. This passion would later prove useful when painting King George V who, despite being ‘a little hard going at first’, loosened up when discussing with Birley the complexities of shooting woodcock. During the Second World War, Birley would also shoot birds such as local wood pigeon to supplement the food available for consumption by his family and passing guests at Charleston Manor.

Compositionally and stylistically, this work shows Birley’s admiration for Spanish still life painting from the 17th century. The colouring is austere, with the bird shown on a stone ledge against a dark, almost black background in a manner reminiscent of a *bodegón* (a still life painting of pantry or everyday items) painted by artists such as Juan Sánchez Cotán. We know that Birley revered the work of these Spanish painters, not least Diego Velázquez, whose painting *Prince Baltasar Carlos on Horseback* (Prado, Madrid) the artist copied and proudly hung in his studio at 62 Wellington Road (fig. 49).

Birley travelled extensively, often with Rhoda, and the identity of the places he visited were visually encapsulated in his studies of local inhabitants (cat. 21), but also in views of cultural landmarks, buildings and scenes of everyday life. In this exhibition, we have included two works painted on these foreign excursions; the first is an imposing view of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice (cat. 10), and the second is a more modest study of *A House in Madras* (cat. 19).

The view of the main entrance to Santa Maria della Salute was painted in 1921, and was probably based on sketches undertaken in Venice, where Birley and Rhoda spent their honeymoon in September of that year. Another Venetian-inspired work, also painted in 1921 and likewise probably based on studies, is *Giorgio* (fig. 2). The latter is a less accomplished work: the figure is static, unnatural and visually dislocated from his surroundings. The present work, on the other hand, is painted with great assimilation and clear perspective. Birley evidently considered this work a great success, and it was exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, in an exhibition of contemporary British painting in 1925.

Unlike the painting of Santa Maria della Salute, the view of the house in Madras (now Chennai), was almost certainly painted in situ, and is therefore more sketchy and ruminative in comparison, with the corners of the composition trailing off into just a few strokes of a semi-dry brush. The painting was undertaken in 1927, when Birley and Rhoda were in India on a trip organised by Lord Lloyd, High Commissioner for Egypt and previous Governor of Bombay (now Mumbai). While in Madras, they stayed with George Goschen, 2nd Viscount Goschen, Governor of Madras, whose daughter, Cecily, Birley painted in 1922.

The purpose of this work is very different, and the focus is less on the building itself than its relationship with the local people, seen cooling off in the shade. Another work of the same date, depicting a temple in Madras (Private Collection), is likewise a visual fusion of exotic architecture and local life, although it is altogether more picturesque and lacks the spontaneity of an artist trying to quickly capture a fleeting moment. Both works, however, reveal how foreign buildings provided a platform by which the artist could explore history and culture in ways that portraiture did not always allow.



Fig. 50 Oswald Birley, *The Garden of Hackwood Park, Basingstoke*, 1919, 97.8 x 72.4 cm, oil on canvas, Private Collection.

During periods away from his frantic studio, Birley also indulged in landscape painting. What becomes apparent when considering Birley’s landscape work is the absence of figures and, unlike many of the other ‘off-duty’ works, they have a quiet solemnity and represent the greatest departure from his commercial vocation. As a body of work, they are more difficult to define and, while many of his landscape paintings were simply relaxed, off the cuff observations of his surroundings, other works can only be understood within the context of the time they were painted.

One of the most emotive landscape works by Birley is undoubtedly a view of the garden at Hackwood Park, Basingstoke, (fig. 50) painted just after the First World War in 1919. Themes of isolation and sorrow resonate in this work, and it is difficult to separate the subject matter from recent events in Europe, which likewise cast a shadow and threatened previous pillars of power. Mortality and time are also questioned, as the man-made symbols of strength stand helplessly as nature consumes them over time, leading inevitably to their fall. In this instance, Birley uses landscape painting as a rare moment for symbolic reflection.

During the interwar years, Birley’s career as a portrait painter took off, and landscape painting was a pursuit saved for holidaying abroad. Many of Birley’s landscape works from the 1920s and 1930s are now lost and are known only by their titles, including two views of the Grand Canyon, painted in 1925 and *Olive Groves in Majorca*, painted in 1928. The Grand Canyon views are recorded as being fairly small – 30.5 x 40.6 cm – which may indicate they were painted *en plein air*. The landscape works that have survived can be mostly characterised by the rapid application of paint at the expense of detail. They are surprisingly confident, with a seriousness of purpose expressed in bold strokes, some short and choppy, others long and sweeping. The canvas support is often left visible in places, becoming part of the composition.

This intuitive and fluid boldness with the medium of oil paint is exemplified in *Dover Cliffs* (cat. 38), painted in 1950 towards the end of Birley’s life. The artist was unwell when this work was painted, having not fully recovered from a lengthy spell of bronchitis, and the excursion to Dorset was one of many outdoor trips undertaken by Birley, who considered fresh air helpful to remedying his breathing difficulties. Although in ill health at this point, Birley was frantically busy painting portraits of illustrious subjects including King George VI and Princess Elizabeth, and this view of Dover would be one of the last ‘off-duty’ works he painted prior to his death on 6 May 1952.

As some of the purest distillations of Birley’s artistic responses, these ‘off-duty’ works, free from the constraints of commissions and deadlines, provide valuable insight into the private man. They do not look outwards or attempt to project a message of enduring authority or status as society portraiture required, but represent a valuable diary of his frequent movements and travel, his more soulful inclinations and personal responses that the rigours and expectations of the ruling classes precluded.

Lawrence Hendra, Head of Research

1.
THE RAG SORTER

Signed and dated 1905 and inscribed 'The Rag Sorter/Penicuik. Sept. 1905' on the reverse of the canvas. Oil on canvas, 102 x 152 cm

Lent by Daniel de La Falaise

In the 1870s, Birley's grandfather became part-owner of a paper mill on the outskirts of the small Midlothian town of Penicuik. This portrait of an unknown subject painted by Birley at the age of only 25, depicts a young woman who worked there, pausing from her job of sorting discarded clothing and sailcloth, materials used in the manufacture of paper before any method of separating cellulose was discovered. The following year, Birley painted *The Rag House, Penicuik Mills* (whereabouts unknown).



2.

MISS MABEL BEARDSLEY

Signed and dated 1910. Oil on canvas, 114.3 x 84 cm

Lent by a Private Collection

Mabel Beardsley (1871-1916) was the elder sister of the celebrated *Art Nouveau* artist and illustrator Aubrey Beardsley. She began her career as an actress on the London stage in 1884, marrying fellow actor George Bealby Wright in 1902, when she began performing in male attire as 'George Bealby'. From 1912, she was close to the poet and playwright William Butler Yeats.

She is portrayed wearing a somewhat fanciful costume supposedly worn by an Elizabethan page boy and holding a falcon. Birley was an admirer of Elizabethan visual culture, its fascination with ciphers, riddles and esoteric symbols, and the delicacy and detail to be found in the portrait miniatures of Nicholas Hilliard. There is no evidence that Beardsley was interested in falconry or hawking. The motif was probably Birley's idea; the following year he painted a young woman wearing a fashionable summer dress (Private Collection), complete with broad-brimmed straw hat and with a bird of prey perched on her wrist.



3. THE THEATRE BOX

Signed dated 1910. Oil on canvas, 203.3 x 224.1cm
Lent by a Private Collection

The largest of Birley's known works was exhibited in February 1910 with the Modern Society of Portrait Painters under the title *The Opera Box*. Fashionable individuals occupying luxurious surroundings had been the subjects of Impressionist artists such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Édouard Manet since the 1870s. The gentleman standing is the Australian-born playwright Charles Haddon Chambers (1860-1921), who had moved to London in 1882. Between 1886 and 1917, Chambers wrote and produced a series of successful plays, in particular *Passers-By* in 1911, *The Idler* in 1914 and *The Saving Grace* in 1917, after which his career declined. The ladies are a Mrs Chapman and a Miss Dunnell, and the seated gentleman with the impressive moustache is The Hon. Wilfred Egerton (1879-1939), the fourth son of Francis Charles Egerton, 3rd Earl of Ellesmere. By the early years of the 20th century, Egerton had acquired something of a reputation as a gambler, rake, ladies' man and man about town. Friendly with the writer Hector Hugh Munro, better known by his pen name 'Saki', Egerton was reputedly a model for Saki's stylishly insouciant character of many of his pre-war macabre short stories, Clovis Bassington.



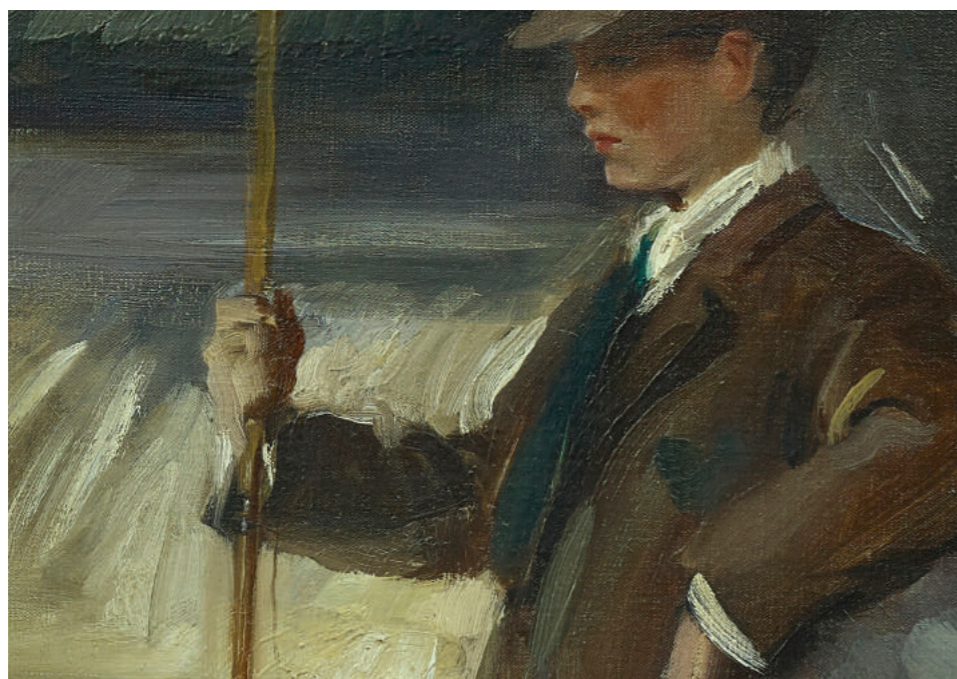
4.

THE HON. HUMPHRY LEGGE BY THE RIVERBANK

Signed and dated 1911. Oil on canvas, 78 x 48 cm

Lent by the Earl of Dartmouth

Birley here portrays The Hon. Humphry Legge (1888-1962) as a young man in a manner evoking Sargent's swiftness of brush and deftness with highlights. Legge later became the 8th Earl of Dartmouth. He was grandfather of the current owner and a cousin of Birley. The artist was himself a keen fisherman, never happier than when pursuing salmon in the south of Ireland or north of Scotland. Legge later became a commander in the Royal Navy during the First World War.



5.
THE SPANISH PLUME

Signed and dated 1912. Oil on canvas, 142.5 x 105.5 cm
Lent by Museums Sheffield

The title references Birley's admiration for Spanish art, particularly Diego Velázquez and Francisco José de Goya. He studied the work of both painters extensively during a year spent in Madrid from 1905–06 (several of Birley's copies of Velázquez masterpieces were included in the contents of the Charleston Manor sale after his death). He was almost certainly looking at similar works by Édouard Manet, Glyn Philpot and Sir William Orpen that depict young women wearing elaborate hats that, in turn, deliberately evoke the manner of Velázquez.

The sitter is Izme Vickers (1885-1966), the daughter of Albert Vickers, who, together with his brother, Edward, was the driving force behind the Sheffield-based leading steel casting business Vickers Ltd. Both brothers were important patrons of John Singer Sargent, who painted Izme's mother Edith in *A Dinner Table at Night* (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, California) and Izme with her brother and sister in the celebrated *Garden Study of the Vickers Children* (Flint Institute of Arts, Michigan) and Izme herself in 1907. Izme presented this painting to Museums Sheffield in 1953.



6.
MARY ALICE CRAWLEY

Signed and dated 1913. Oil on canvas, 113 x 87 cm

Lent by Eustace Crawley

Mary Alice Crawley (1870-1964) was a talented pianist and harpsichordist, and was much in demand for high society soirées. Her husband George was a friend of Birley's from his Cambridge days, and was a noted architect, interior decorator and furniture designer. He provided furniture for Birley's New York studio in the early 1920s, the interior of his London home at 62 Wellington Road, St John's Wood, later in the decade, and his country residence at Charleston Manor, Sussex, from the early 1930s. Although an amateur and entirely self-taught, George Crawley designed magnificent exteriors and interiors on both sides of the Atlantic, such as Westbury House, Long Island, for John 'Jay' Phipps and Crowhurst Place, Surrey, for Consuelo Vanderbilt.



7.

AN INTERIOR AT JAMES PRYDE'S

Signed and dated 1914. Oil on canvas, 168 x 132 cm

Lent by the Earl of Dartmouth

This is considered Birley's most accomplished interior scene and probably depicts the interior at 3 Lansdowne House, Holland Park, the block of studios built by Sir Edmund Davis to which James Pryde (1866-1941) moved after the break-up of his marriage some time between 1912 and 1915.

Originally from Edinburgh, Pryde formed one half of the short-lived but influential print making partnership known as The Beggarstaff Brothers together with Birley's friend William Nicholson, which lasted from 1893-99. Birley is also likely to have met Pryde through some of the 'Glasgow Boys' he met between 1902-03, such as Sir James Guthrie, Sir John Lavery and Harrington Mann. Exhibited at the Royal Academy in May 1914, this composition greatly impressed the critics and revealed Birley's ability to paint an elaborate interior convincingly.



8.

SIX SKETCHES OF BRITISH ARMY OFFICERS

Signed and dated 1916. Pencil, pen and ink on paper, each work 16 x 11 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

The subjects of these incisive studies were officers serving on the staff of XV Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Horne, on the Somme battlefront (July–December 1916). Birley served as an Intelligence Officer with the Headquarters Staff of XV Corps from 21 July 1916–26 January 1917. Birley was the nephew of General Horne through Horne's marriage to his mother's elder sister. Birley exhibited his portrait of Horne at the Royal Academy in May 1918. It was at the behest of XV Corps Headquarters that Birley painted the evocative traffic guidance sign *Tattenham Corner* (Imperial War Museum, London), which marked a sharp turn on the road between the villages of Fricourt and Bécordel-Bécourt.



9.

SELF-PORTRAIT IN PROFILE

Signed and dated 1920. Oil on canvas, 123 x 90.2 cm

Lent by a Private Collection

This is one of several self-portraits Birley painted during his career and was probably a favourite as, for many years, it was displayed prominently in his drawing room at his London home of 62 Wellington Road. The portrait was exhibited to acclaim in a joint exhibition Birley held in New York in June 1921 with his old friends Glyn Philpot and Gerald Kelly. In October 1936, Birley gave permission for this portrait to be reproduced alongside an advertisement in *The Times*, in which the painter endorsed the merits of 'rational tailoring' for men. He was much attracted to painting profile portraits; he regarded conveying character and personality through the partial display of a face as a stimulating challenge.



10.

FAÇADE OF SANTA MARIA DELLA SALUTE, VENICE

Signed and dated 1921. Oil on canvas, 89 x 69 cm

Lent by a Private Collection

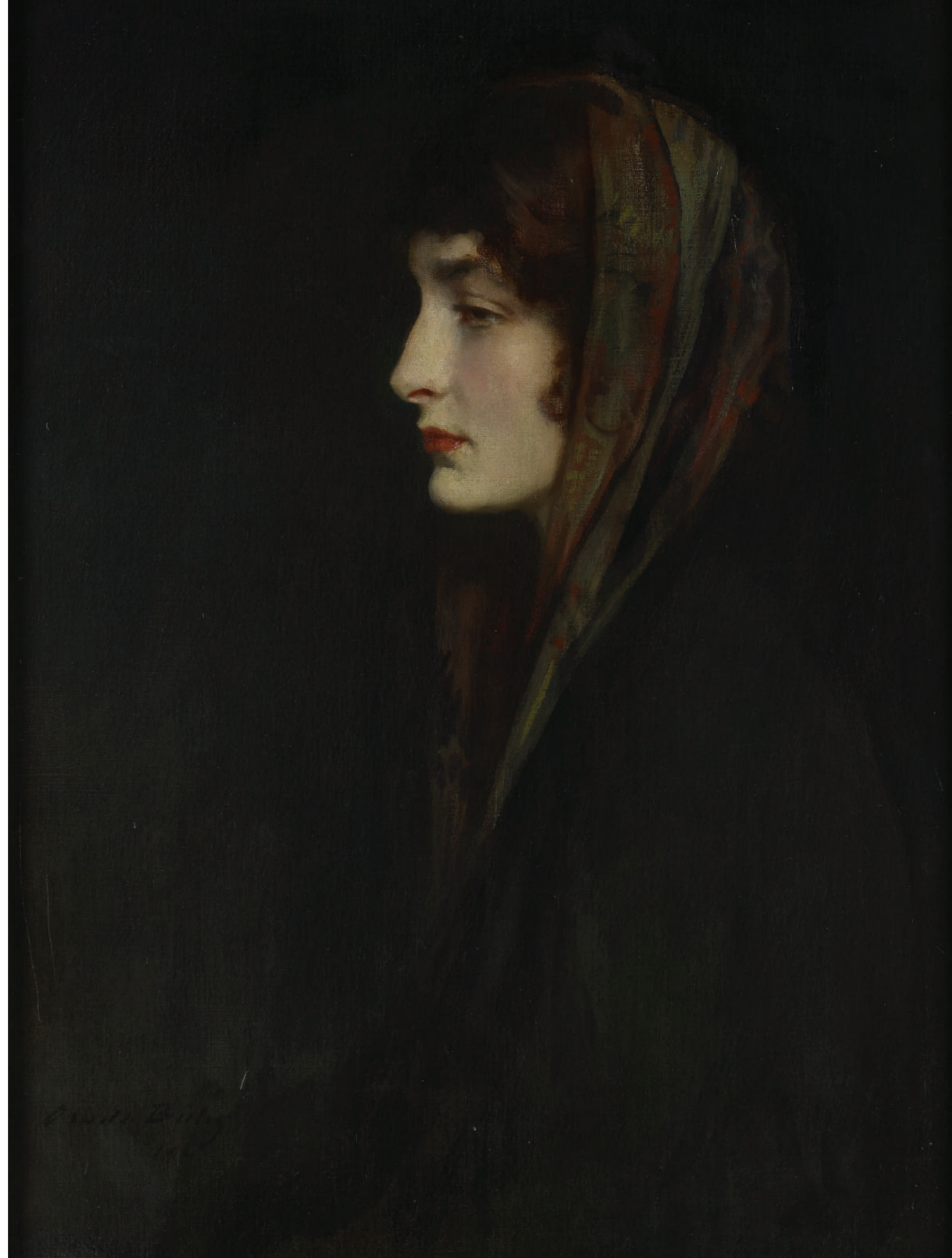
The main entrance to the famous Venetian church of Santa Maria della Salute, which faces the Dogana entrance to the Grand Canal, was painted by Birley during late-September to early-October 1921 while on honeymoon with his wife, Rhoda. The church has inspired artists since it was built in the mid-seventeenth century, and John Singer Sargent is known to have painted the main entrance (seen here) at least fifteen times. Venice was one of Birley's favourite foreign destinations and he visited it several times between the wars. Later in the 1920s, Glyn Philpot and Wilfred de Glehn accompanied him and Rhoda to the city. Birley regarded subjects such as architectural studies, along with landscapes and still lifes, as 'off duty' creations – a form of relaxation from the incessant demands of portrait production.



11.
RHODA BIRLEY IN PROFILE

Signed and dated 1921. Oil on canvas, 90.2 x 67.3 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

Birley married Anglo-Irish beauty Rhoda Vava Mary Lecky Pike (1900-81), who was 20 years his junior, at St Mary's Anglican Church, Bryanston Square, London, on 14 September 1921. Her father was landowner and sportsman Robert Lecky Pike, known as 'Piko', of Kilnock, County Carlow, which by early 1922 had become part of the new Irish Free State, independent from mainland Britain but still tenuously part of the British Empire. Rhoda was vivacious, capricious, wayward and moody, but Birley loved her dearly and overlooked her occasional affairs. She was one of Birley's favourite subjects – he never tired of painting her (cats 13 & 15). In this depiction, he was clearly looking back at the portraiture he revered of Spanish 17th-century master Diego Velázquez. Rhoda noted that Sir Joseph Duveen particularly approved of 'the side face of me' when the portrait was exhibited at the Duveen Galleries in January 1923.



12.
'SEM'

Signed and dated 1921. Oil on canvas, 140 x 103 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

Sem was the penname of the French satirist and caricaturist Georges Goursat (1863-1934) who found fame towards the end of the 19th century as the chronicler of fashionable *fin de siècle* Paris, receiving the *Légion d'honneur* in 1904. A friend of Marcel Proust and of artists such as Jean-Louis Forain and Jules Pascin, Sem was at the height of his fame when painted by Birley, who also fell under his spell, with Sem agreeing to be godfather to Birley's first child Maxime upon her birth the year after this was painted. The portrait was hailed as a masterpiece when exhibited at the Paris Salon and with the International Society in London in 1921. It was also well received when exhibited in America for the first time at the Duveen Galleries in New York in March–April 1924.

Sem's later years were clouded by poor health and he lost nearly all his money in the Wall Street Crash of October 1929. Birley wrote a most sympathetic and touching appreciation of Sem, which was published in *The Times* after the Frenchman's death aged 71 in late November 1934.



SEM Oswald Birley Paris 1921



13.
THE GREEN MASQUE

Signed and dated 1922. Oil on canvas, 150 x 110 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

One of the most scintillating and evocative of Birley's many portraits of his wife Rhoda, this was painted after they attended the Venice Carnival of February 1922. The costume chimed readily with Birley's fascination with the historical romance of 18th Century Venice and such protagonists as Giacomo Casanova, Carlo Goldoni, Giovanni Antonio Canal (Canaletto) and, especially, Francesco Guardi. The portrait was well received by American critics when first exhibited at the Duveen Galleries in New York in January 1923.



14.
OLIVE PIKE

Signed and dated 1922 and inscribed
'To Olive Pike from Oswald Birley'. Oil on canvas, 99 x 75 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

Olive Pike (1888-1962), née Snell, married Rhoda Birley's elder brother Ebenezer – the subject of a later Birley portrait, *The Fencer* (cat. 26). Olive was already a talented painter upon her arrival in London from her native South Africa in 1912. She studied with Augustus John, who painted an imposing portrait of his pupil (whereabouts unknown). In the mid-1920s, Birley asked his friend and patron Sir Joseph Duveen to help further her career as a portrait artist in America during two visits she made to New York. Duveen was able to help her with introductions to several influential figures in Hollywood.

During the Second World War, Olive drew many portraits of pilots and aircrew as an official war artist attached to the Royal Air Force. Birley's conception of the portrait, in particular the presentation of Olive's dress, suggests a considerable debt to such artists of Spanish Golden Age portraiture as Diego Velázquez.



15.
RHODA WEARING A CHINESE SILK BLOUSE

Signed and dated 1923. Oil on canvas, 78 x 64 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

Maxime Birley noted that her father loved to buy his wife stylish clothes, often of exotic colours and materials. The deft and delicate treatment of the turban and silk blouse indicate Birley's skill at suggesting the reality of such rare and expensive materials. Birley himself was known to be personally keen on silk, and had silk pyjamas specially made for him in London's Chinatown. The Oriental origin of the silk used to make the blouse hints at Birley's wider interest in the Far East.

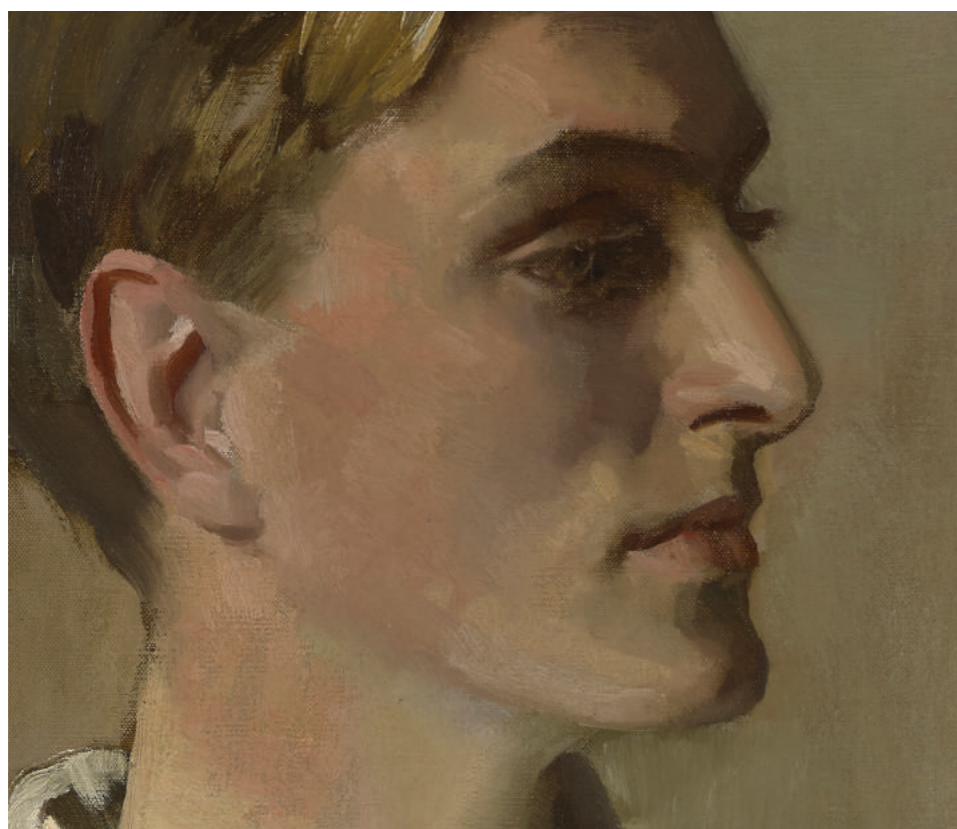
Six years later, Rhoda accompanied Birley to Thailand, where he had been commissioned to paint portraits of the Thai King and Queen. Around the same time, he befriended the British Ambassador to China, Sir Archibald Clark Kerr. In October 1942, Birley helped organise, and contributed work to, an exhibition in London to raise money for the charity United Aid to China Fund.



16.
ARMINE DEW

Signed and dated 1923. Oil on canvas, 77 x 64 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

This portrait reveals that Birley was more than able to paint beauty and grace in a male visage. Armine Dew (1906-45) MVO was 20 years of age at the time he met Birley in New York through the highly successful art dealer and impresario Sir Joseph Duveen. An Exhibitioner in History at New College, Oxford, he entered the Diplomatic Service, quickly rising to the position of First Secretary and serving in Washington, Paris, Moscow and finally Belgrade, where he was taken prisoner by the Italians with the Legation staff. After his release, Dew was selected for Churchill's staff at the Yalta Conference, but was tragically killed aged only 38 when the aircraft carrying staff and other personnel involved in the Conference crashed into the sea off the island of Lampedusa on 1 February 1945.



17.
LADY GRIMTHORPE

Signed and dated 1925. Oil on canvas, 113 x 84 cm
Lent by Lord Grimthorpe

Mary Alice Archdale (1891-1962) married Ralph Beckett, a banker and racehorse breeder, in 1914. Three years later, he inherited the title of 3rd Baron Grimthorpe upon the death of his father, as well as the magnificent Villa Cimbrone in Ravello, on the outskirts of Naples. In 1904, his father had acquired the villa and its extensive gardens and spent many years thereafter restoring both. Lord and Lady Grimthorpe continued the restoration, and the villa became a popular retreat for such artists, writers and politicians as Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Edward Morgan Forster and Winston Churchill (cat. 39).

The Grimthorpes would have met the Birleys through marriage, as Lady Grimthorpe's sister, Cicely Archdale, married the 2nd Marquess of Zetland in 1907, and became the mother-in-law of Birley's niece Penelope Pike (cat. 30) in 1936. Birley mentioned in a letter to Sir Joseph Duveen on 7 December 1925 that he was currently working on a portrait of Lady Grimthorpe.



18.
A PALM BEACH MUSICIAN(?)

Signed and dated 1925–26. Oil on canvas, 66 x 52 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

This freely painted profile was made during Birley's first visit to Palm Beach, Florida, at the urging of Sir Joseph Duveen early in 1925, where he found the heat and intense colours greatly to his taste. Birley and Rhoda stayed at the select Everglades Club, Palm Beach, from January–April 1925 and for the same period the following year. They returned to Palm Beach in the late 1940s as guests of millionairess Marjorie Merriweather Post at her specially built villa, Mar-a-Lago. According to Maxime, her father did not care much for the latest jazz, but did enjoy listening to the musicians playing impromptu folk songs and spirituals at the Everglades Club or the popular hotel, The Breakers. It is highly possible that the subject was in this milieu.



19.
A HOUSE IN MADRAS

Signed and dated 1927. Oil on canvas, 71.3 x 83.8 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

During their first visit to India from January–February 1927, Birley and Rhoda stayed in and around Madras (now Chennai) as the guests of George Goschen, 2nd Viscount Goschen, Governor of Madras, a portrait of whose daughter Cicely Birley had painted some five years earlier. Birley tended to venture out on painting excursions early in the morning, between 5am and 6am, as thereafter it was simply too hot for him to paint in the open air.



20.
AN INDIAN BOY

Signed and dated 1927. Oil on canvas, 102.8 x 77.5 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

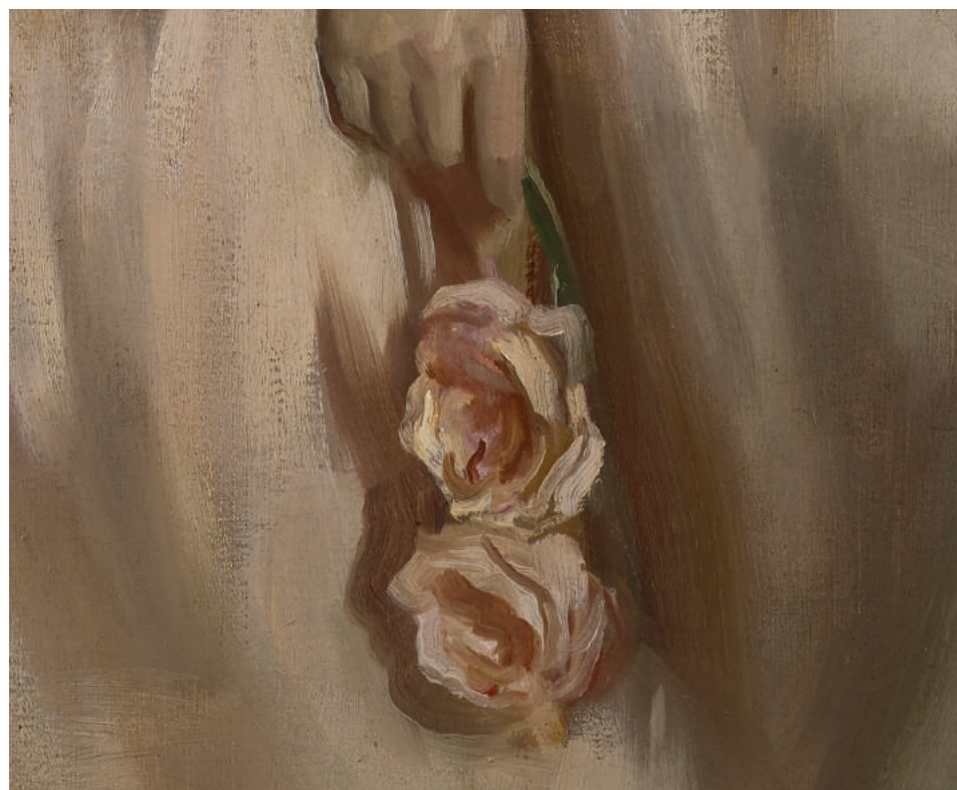
Birley's first visit to India was between January and April 1927, when he travelled extensively throughout the subcontinent. India, its cultures, religions, ancient art and architecture, fascinated him. In November 1927, he wrote to Sir Joseph Duveen that he and Rhoda had had a 'wonderful time in India' and that four months had been all too short a time to properly appreciate this 'bewitching land'. Although the exact circumstances and identity of the sitter are unknown, Birley is known to have painted the locals he encountered (cat. 29) on most of his trips to India, when he was not carrying out commissions.



21.
MISS RUTH EZRA

Signed and dated 1928. Oil on canvas, 124 x 86 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

Apart from his evident talent when it came to painting adults, Birley was highly thought of for his ability to paint children with charm and without succumbing to sugary sentimentality (cats 22 & 27). Birley was the favourite artist of the Ezra family, and painted Ruth's mother Muriel and her elder sister Aline. Ruth (1919-2007) was the youngest daughter of Alfred Ezra, a famous aviculturist who lived at Foxwarren Park, Surrey, and whose beautiful grounds were noted for their magnificent collection of rare birds and animals. Ruth inherited her father's avian fascination and, together with her husband Raymond Sawyer, became a well-known breeder of rare birds.



22.

MASTER PATRICK CRICHTON

Signed and dated 1928. Oil on canvas, 95 x 82.5 cm

Lent by Desmond Crichton

This endearing portrait, painted when Patrick Crichton (b.1919) was aged nine, is another example of Birley's ability to present a convincing image of innocence while avoiding the overly idealised and saccharine when it came to painting children. His unforced and engaging presentation of Crichton suggests his admiration for the child portraiture of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo and Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Crichton grew up with his two sisters about a mile from Windsor Castle. It is highly likely that his father, Colonel Sir George Crichton, who was Comptroller of the Lord Chamberlain's Office from 1920–36 and an extra equerry to Kings George V, Edward VIII and George VI, would have encountered Birley in these royal circles. Patrick Crichton held the office of Page of Honour to George V from 1932–36. He had a distinguished career in the City, culminating in his appointment as the Deputy Chairman of Foreign and Colonial Trust in 1974. He was invested as an Officer, Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1991 for charitable services.



23.

PRIME MINISTER STANLEY BALDWIN

Signed and dated 1928. Oil on canvas, 133 x 110 cm
On loan from the House of Commons, Palace of Westminster, London

With his head on hand, Birley is utilising an iconographic tradition of subjects in a state of reflection that reaches back to the late Elizabethan period. Birley first painted Prime Minister Baldwin (1867-1947) in January–February 1928 for the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths. Baldwin had been a member of the Company's Court of Assistants since 1916. Baldwin and his wife were so pleased with the portrait that, on their incentive, the Company commissioned Birley to paint a copy to hang in Baldwin's Worcestershire home. The initial portrait was presented to Baldwin on 15 March 1928 and has hung ever after in the Company's hall. Baldwin had become the surprise choice as Conservative Party Leader and Prime Minister after his predecessor Andrew Bonar Law resigned owing to poor health in May 1923. Baldwin had lost a snap election in December 1923 on the issue of tariffs for cheap imports undercutting British products. When the minority Labour government fell in October 1924, Baldwin won the ensuing general election for the Conservatives by a landslide. Birley had been very impressed with Baldwin; since returning to Britain from France in 1919 he had generally voted Conservative. He particularly approved of Baldwin's firm yet compassionate treatment of striking workers in the short-lived general strike of May 1926. The portrait was exhibited to considerable acclaim at the Royal Academy in May 1928. Well may Baldwin have appeared a touch pensive and lost in thought in the portrait – the British economy was sluggish at the time and unemployment was rising. In the general election of the following year, in late-May 1929, he lost heavily to Ramsay MacDonald and the Labour Party.



24.

HIS MAJESTY KING GEORGE V

Signed and dated 1928. Oil on canvas, 128 x 102.2 cm

Lent by the National Museum Wales, Cardiff

Birley thought highly of King George V (1865-1936) and was very proud of the officer's commission he had received, signed by the King, in November 1915. Just as his portrait of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin (cat. 24) was his first of a major politician, thanks to the recommendation of Lord Kenyon (at the time President of the governing Council of the National Museum Wales), this commission was Birley's first of a British monarch. The King gave Birley four sittings during June 1928, each lasting an hour to an hour and a half. Birley initially found his sitter rather grumpy and uncommunicative but, once the artist brought up their shared passion for shooting and fishing, the King quickly warmed to him. Indeed, Birley found he had to calm his sitter down when the King became animated over the question of his shooting technique.

The King was most taken with the portrait; he approved of the tactful way the artist had depicted the evidence of time relentlessly passing in the white whiskers of the royal beard, though he thought Birley had made his hands seem too lined and careworn. He insisted the portrait be exhibited at the Royal Academy in May 1929, where it impressed many observers for conveying a reassuring image of an ageing yet still vigorous King-Emperor. After the portrait had come down at the Royal Academy, the King kept it until July 1929 in order that he could show it to the visiting King of Thailand, whose portrait Birley had painted in Bangkok in January of the same year. The portrait was placed in a position of honour within the Court Room of the National Museum Wales early in October 1929 in recognition of the King having laid the initial foundation stone for the Museum in June 1912, and formally opened the building in April 1927. The portrait hangs there to this day.

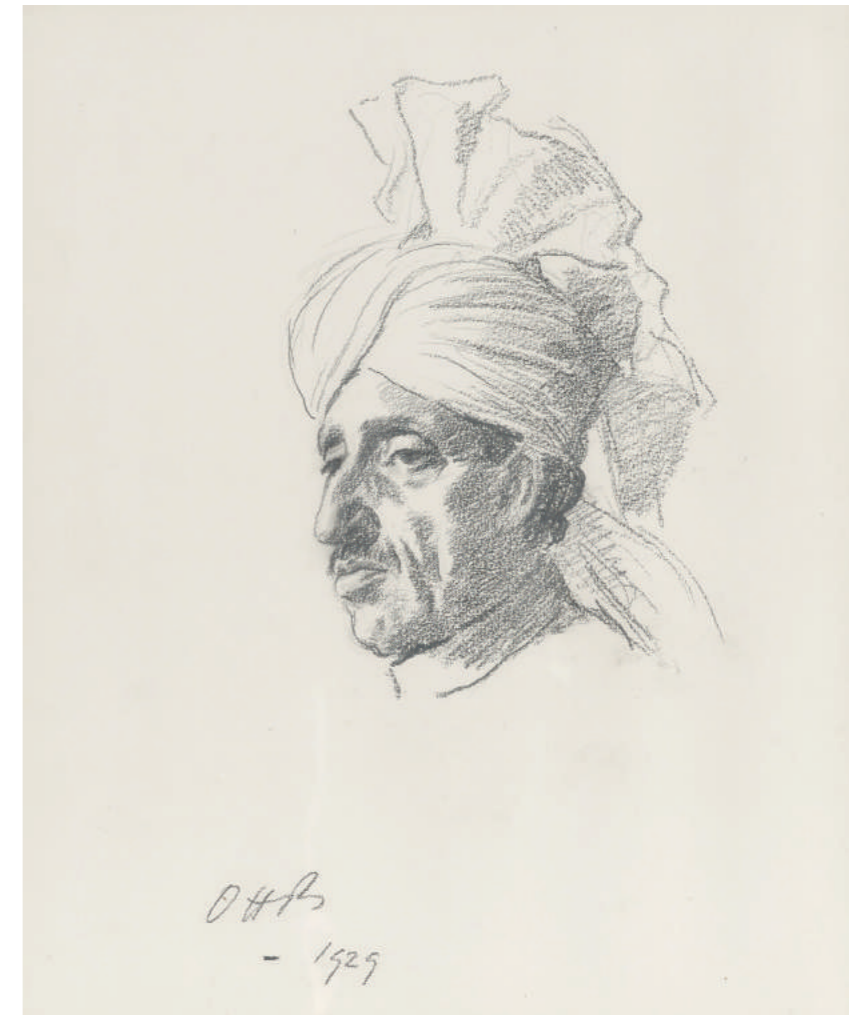


25.
AN INDIAN OFFICIAL

Signed and dated 1929. Charcoal on paper, 63.6 x 56 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

Returning to England from Bangkok, Birley and Rhoda spent much of March 1929 touring India – particularly Bengal in the north-east and Kashmir to the north-west. The sitter, in this case, may have been a member of the court of Indira Devi Sahiba, the youthful and impressive Maharani of Cooch-Bihar, whom Birley painted in 1929 in West Bengal. That year, Birley painted a series of portraits of senior Indian members of the Raj's judiciary for display within the Colonial Office in London, and received a commission to paint Viceroy Edward Wood, at the time Lord Irwin and later 1st Earl of Halifax.

Ironically, given that he was dedicated to the end of British rule in India, in November 1931, Birley painted a highly sympathetic portrait of Mohandas Karamchand 'Mahatma' Gandhi while the Congress Party leader was attending the second All-India Round Table Conference in London. Lord Irwin chaired the Conference (Birley's portrait of Irwin as Viceroy was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in May 1932 and then unveiled inside the Viceroy's House in New Delhi in March 1934). The present portrait was commissioned by Sir Prabhashankar Pattani, Chief Minister of the princely state of Bhavnagar, in Gujarat, and a friend of Gandhi's since their shared student days. Birley first met Pattani during his March 1929 visit to India.



26.
THE FENCER

Signed and dated 1931. Oil on canvas, 152.5 x 127 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

The sitter of this definingly impressive work, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in May 1931, is Birley's brother-in-law, Rhoda's elder brother Lieutenant-Colonel Ebenezer John Lecky Pike (1884-1965) MC. Educated at Harrow School (Birley's old school) and Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Pike was commissioned into the Grenadier Guards in 1906. In April 1913, having risen to the rank of Captain, Pike married Olive Snell – whose portrait Birley first appears to have painted in 1923 (cat. 15). Pike arrived in France as a Company Commander in the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadier Guards, as part of the British Expeditionary Force, in August 1914. During the retreat from Mons later that month, and in the Battle of the Aisne in September 1914, he distinguished himself in action, twice being mentioned in despatches. In the closing phase of the First Battle of Ypres, towards the end of November 1914, Pike was seriously wounded in the chest and legs. Shortly thereafter, he was awarded the Military Cross for bravery and leadership under fire and mentioned in despatches for a third time. He was evacuated to London for lengthy medical treatment for his numerous wounds. He did eventually recover and, while convalescing, he took up fencing to exercise legs muscles that had atrophied during his many months of confinement to a hospital bed. Sadly, he never again commanded men in action in the field. For the rest of the First World War, he served in a series of staff appointments attached to the Grenadier Guards and the Headquarters staff of the Brigade of Guards.

In 1919, Pike was posted to Istanbul as a major with the British Occupation Forces for a year. Returning to London in 1920, he was promoted to become adjutant of the 1st Battalion of the Grenadier Guards. However, it would seem he found the transition to peace time army life a difficult one, and was still greatly affected by memories of his searing experiences at the Front in 1914. Indeed, he had to take almost a year, 1925–26, off on 'sick leave', during which he consulted two 'nerve specialists' – probably to help him cope with the effects of what was then termed 'shell shock' and now known as post-traumatic stress disorder. Regular fencing matches were recommended to Pike as an intense and absorbing physical activity and to keep his mind occupied. The treatment appeared to work as, in 1927, Pike was promoted to take command of the 1st Battalion of the Grenadier Guards, retiring from the Army as a Colonel early in 1931, shortly before this portrait was exhibited. Thus, the apparently self-confident Pike in the portrait was actually looking out into an uncertain future. After leaving the Army, Pike took up farming and lived the life of a country squire in Hertfordshire. During the Second World War, his life found new purpose when, in 1940, he was appointed a Sector Commander for the Sussex Home Guard. Birley was one of his subordinates. However, Pike was not to be spared one last tragedy: early in March 1945, his only son was killed in action aged 20 during the British crossing of the River Rhine. Pike continued to fence into his 70s; he maintained that the sport kept his mind and body alert, and he outlived Birley, being appointed as one of the executors of the artist's will in 1952.



27.

THE YOUNG GIRL IN A BLUE SASH

Signed and dated 1934. Oil on canvas, 133.5 x 100.2 cm

Lent by a Private Collection

Birley's only daughter, Maxine (1922-2009) (she later preferred to call her herself Maxime), was aged 12 when this portrait was painted. Maxime was very much the apple of her father's eye and, in later life, he mused on whether he had not been prone to overindulging her every whim. This striking and appealing portrait, which seems deftly informed by Birley's admiration for the early 19th-century portraiture of Sir Thomas Lawrence, was photographed in October 1936 hanging in the main drawing room of Birley's London home at 62 Wellington Road, St John's Wood. Maxime later recalled that she was training to become a ballet dancer under the prima ballerina Lydia Sokolova at the time she sat for this portrait. Acknowledged as a beauty from an early age, Birley never seemed to tire of painting portraits of his daughter and several have survived. By the mid-1930s, she had already been photographed by a number of leading fashion photographers such as George Hoyningen-Huene, Cecil Beaton and Madame Yvonde. A decade after this portrait was painted, Maxime horrified her parents by volunteering to serve with the Special Operations Executive with the aim of parachuting into France and using her excellent French as an agent and radio operator. Birley had to pull a lot of strings in high places, for example with his friend Chief of the Imperial General Staff General Brooke, to ensure that Maxime was assigned to a desk job in London with the Special Operations Executive.

After the Second World War, in July 1946, Maxime married Comte Alain de La Falaise, second son of the late Comte de La Falaise and Countess Antoinette Hoquart de Turtet of Rue Tasso, Paris. She resumed a highly successful career as a fashion model, working for, among others, Yves Saint Laurent, Elsa Schiaparelli and Andy Warhol (she appeared in his 1974 film *Dracula*) and also became increasingly interested in cookery and food writing. After divorcing the Comte de La Falaise in the late 1960s, she moved from France to New York and was appointed Food Editor for *Vogue* magazine. She married a second time, to John McKendry, Curator of Prints at the Metropolitan Museum (McKendry, an alcoholic, died in 1975). To positive reviews, she published her book *Seven Centuries of English Cooking* in 1973. In her later years, she became increasingly eccentric, supposedly taking after her mother. She moved to live in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where she died in April 2009. Her daughter from her first marriage, Louise, known as Loulou de La Falaise, became, in turn, a highly successful and much sought-after fashion model.



28.
KYRA NIJINSKA

Signed and dated 1935. Oil on canvas, 89 x 69 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

Birley was unusually well informed about the ballet world both in London and on the Continent, an interest he later shared with his wife, Rhoda. They also promoted 19th- and early-20th-century Russian literature and culture, often staging events at their house in London. According to Maxime's letters, this portrait shows Kyra Nijinska (1913-98) wearing her costume for her role in Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. Birley had marvelled at Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, the sumptuous exoticism of the costumes and the supposedly 'barbaric energy' of the dancing when the company had first performed in London in 1910-1911. Nijinska was the daughter of ballet sensation Vaslav Nijinska, who starred with the *Ballets Russes* between 1909-14 and had taken the lead role in the sensational first performance of *The Rite of Spring* in May 1913.

Growing up, Nijinska was determined to emerge from beneath her father's shadow and establish her own career as a successful ballerina. In the early 1930s, she studied under her aunt Bronislava Nijinska and then at the Paris Opera Ballet School. In 1934, she joined the Ballet Rambert and was widely deemed a hit in a role her father had performed in *Le Spectre de la rose*. As a performer, she was admired if not for her technique, for her ability to convey emotion. Nijinska was famed for her high cheek bones and beautiful green eyes. However, she was self-conscious about her thick neck and compact, muscular physique that she had inherited from her father. Indeed, during the 1930s, she often performed dressed as a male ballet student.

In 1936, she married Diaghilev's last lover, the Ukrainian-born composer and conductor, Igor Markevitch, but they divorced after three years. Her career then rather petered out. She moved to Italy and, in 1943, was briefly imprisoned by the German occupation authorities on suspicion of spying. After the war, she worked as an interpreter and ran a boutique. In 1954, she moved to San Francisco where she took up painting, poetry and spiritualism. She died in the city in September 1998.

During his career, Birley painted two other Russian ballerinas: Tamara Karsavina for the *De Basil Ballet* in 1921 and Alexandra Danilova for the *Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo* in 1937.



29.

AN INDIAN GIRL WEARING A SARI

Signed and dated Bombay 1936. Oil on canvas, 99 x 74 cm

Lent by the Marquis of Lansdowne

This portrait was probably painted in Birley's London studio at 62 Wellington Road, St John's Wood, from studies he made during his last visit to India in 1935. He had made a solo trip to see his old friend from the First Army in the First World War, Michael 'Mickey' Knatchbull, 5th Baron Brabourne, who, at the time, was Governor of Bombay. Birley made a number of sketches of 'local types' during his trip to Bombay (now Mumbai) and during two shooting trips that he and Brabourne made to Sindh and Balochistan in the north-west of India. The sympathy and compassion with which Birley depicted his Indian sitters was firmly rooted in his considerable admiration for the understanding and pathos that Sir Joshua Reynolds brought to their depiction of non-white individuals in the mid- to late-18th century.

During the Second World War, Birley continued to take a keen interest in India, contributing to charity exhibitions, for example, to raise money for the relief of the victims of the Bengal famine of 1943–1944. He was also in demand to paint the portraits of senior figures within the Raj as they approached retirement from their posts – in 1943 he was commissioned to paint Victor Hope, 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow, Viceroy from April 1936–October 1943 (Hopetoun House, Scotland).



30.

PENELOPE PIKE, LATER COUNTESS OF
RONALDSHAY AND MARCHIONESS OF ZETLAND

Signed, dated and inscribed 'To Penelope from Oswald Birley 1936'.

Oil on canvas, 82 x 63 cm

Lent by a Private Collection

Birley painted this youthful portrait of his niece Katherine Mary Penelope 'Pen' Pike (c. 1914-2003), the youngest daughter of Colonel Ebenezer Pike, upon her engagement to Lawrence Aldred Mervyn Dundas, Earl of Ronaldshay and eldest son of Lawrence Dundas, 2nd Marquess of Zetland, whom she married in December the following year. From the mid-1930s, she was regarded as one of the society beauties of the age and was frequently asked to perform in *tableaux vivants* alongside other society ladies to raise money for charitable causes. It was at one such event that her future husband first noticed her.

The *Observer* reported in February 1939 that the Earl of Ronaldshay had unveiled an impressive portrait by Birley of his beautiful wife, Penelope, inside the Drawing Room of his home in Cambridge Square, London. The article reports that, in the painting, she is wearing a striking dress of 'wine-coloured taffeta'.

In October 1942, Birley was commissioned to paint a portrait of Penelope's father-in-law, the 2nd Marquess of Zetland, to be displayed inside the headquarters of the Royal Geographical Society of which he had been President. Birley and the 2nd Marquess quickly hit it off, as both shared a passion for Indian history and culture: the 2nd Marquess had previously served as Governor of Bengal and Secretary of State for India. The portrait was complete by December 1943 and Penelope, as Countess of Ronaldshay, was present for its official presentation by the 2nd Marquess to the President of the Royal Geographical Society on 10 January 1944.



31.
NANNY TRICKETT

Signed and dated 1937. Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 81.2 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

Birley's admiration for Rembrandt and Hals is evident in this sensitive portrait; the pose, subtle use of black and fluidity of painting in the ruff and the wisps of white hair escaping from under the subject's hat all owe a debt to Dutch 17th-century painting. Nanny Trickett (c. 1865–c. 1944/5) took care of Birley as a child growing up in North Wales in the 1880s. He remained in touch with her and, when she fell on hard times in the 1930s, brought her to Charleston Manor to keep an eye on his young son Mark as well the pet dogs Raggles and Remus. Birley was clearly proud of this portrait, as he chose to exhibit it at the 46th exhibition of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters from November–December 1937 (together with cat. 30). *The Times*, on 19 November 1937, commented that both were 'excellent'.



32.

THE DANCER FROM THE COQ D'OR BALLET

Signed and dated 1938. Oil on canvas, 87 x 72.5 cm

Lent by a Private Collection

This arresting portrait of young Anglo-Japanese dancer, Sono Osato (b. 1919), was first exhibited at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in November 1938. Though, in homage to his hero Diego Velázquez, Birley usually employed a more muted palette, on occasion he would deploy an intensely coloured backdrop as though to emphasise the exoticism of his subject. His depiction of Osato was informed by images of exotic – usually female subjects – which were often set against brightly coloured backgrounds by Birley's friends and contemporaries Gerald Kelly, Glyn Philpot and David Jagger.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, one of Birley's favourite classical composers, together with Igor Stravinsky and André Tchaikowsky, had first created *Le Coq d'Or* in 1907. Sergei Diaghilev turned the work into a ballet that was first performed by his *Ballets Russes* in Paris in 1914. An expensive production to mount, *Le Coq d'Or* was revived in the mid-1930s by the *Ballets Russes de Basil*. Several times during the 1930s, Birley auctioned canvases to raise funds for ballet companies such as the *de Basil*, which were suffering from the after-effects of the Wall Street Crash.

Birley is not known to have ever shown any interest in Japan and its culture. However, in the late 1930s, he visited the British-Chinese community in Limehouse, East London, and sketched a number of its members. During the Second World War, in 1942 and 1944, he contributed to art exhibitions in London raising money for the charity United Aid To China Fund, promoted by Clementine Churchill.



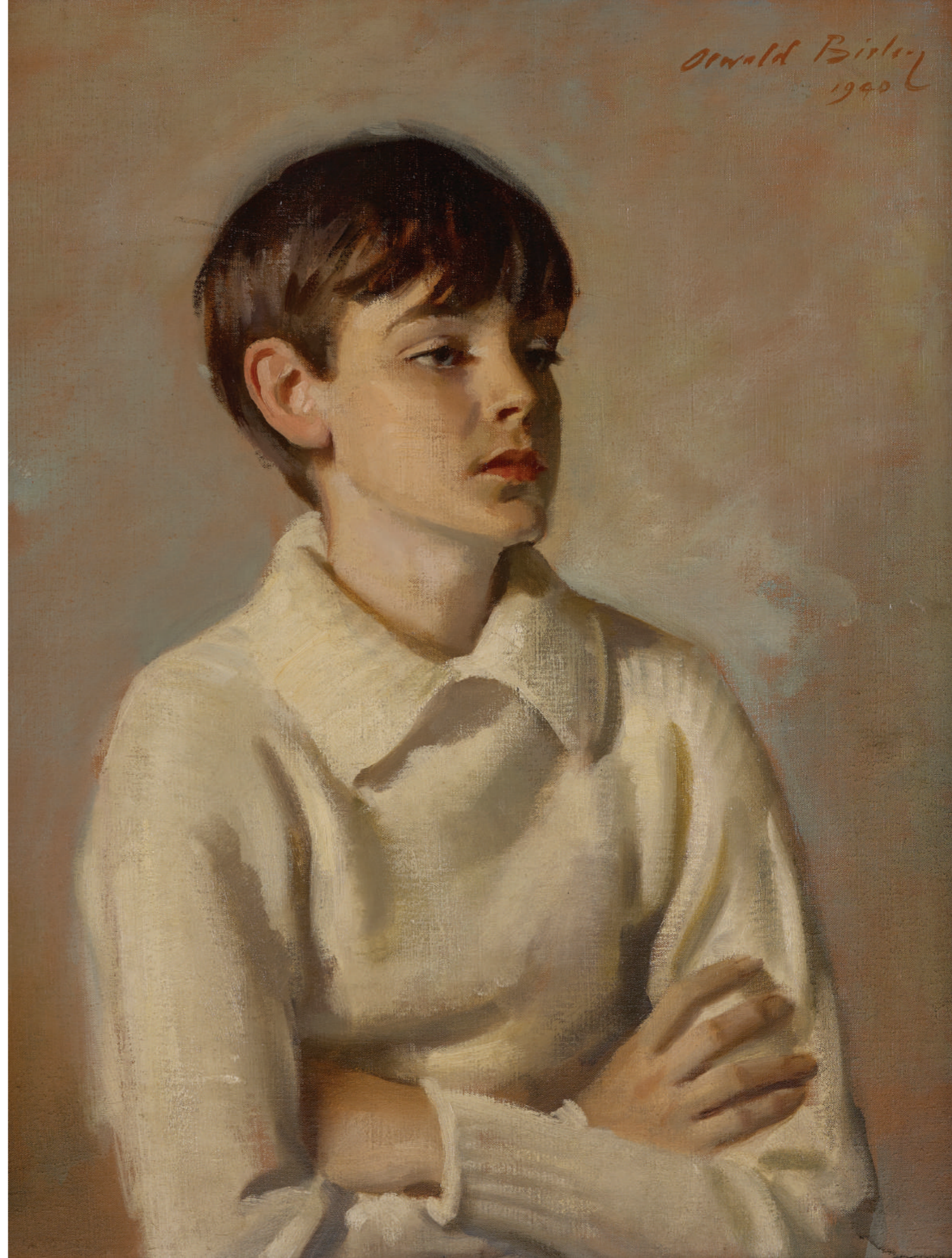
33.

MARK BIRLEY

Signed and dated 1940. Oil on canvas, 56 x 71.2 cm

Lent by a Private Collection

Marcus Oswald Hornby Lecky Birley (1930-2007), known as Mark, was Birley's only son and sister of Maxime. Birley was 50 when Mark was born, and this intimate image of his ten-year-old son is one of few paintings that Birley painted of him. Mark was educated at Eton College and Oxford where, like his father, he excelled at drawing, followed by National Service from 1948-50. After a career in advertising and a period with the French luxury goods company Hermès, Mark went on to found Annabel's in 1963, the first of a string of exclusive members-only clubs and restaurants that would eventually include Mark's Club, Harry's Bar, the Bath & Racquets Club and George Club. In 1954, he married Annabel Vane-Tempest-Stewart, daughter of the 8th Marquess of Londonderry and for whom his first club was named. Mark Birley was a friend and patron of artists including his mother's contemporary Adrian Daintrey, the glass engraver Laurence Whistler and the portraitist John Ward. In 1983, Ward produced a triptych of the founding members of Annabel's to mark the club's 20th anniversary. Oswald and Rhoda's artistic legacy are clearly perceived in Mark Birley's artistic eye, attention to detail and sense of colour.



34.

SIR ANTHONY MEYER, 3rd Bt

Signed and dated 1942. Oil on canvas, 119.5 x 93.5 cm

Lent by a Private Collection

Anthony Meyer (1920-2004) became 3rd Baronet on the sudden death of his father in a riding accident in 1935. He was educated at Eton College and New College, Oxford (which he attended 1939-40). Early in 1941, he married Barbadee Knight and, in March-April of that year, he worked in London during the Blitz, helping to clear rubble from bombsites. He was called up for military service in April 1941 and commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Scots Guards in July of that year.

After receiving his commission, he was posted early in 1942 to the headquarters of the Brigade of Guards as a Liaison Officer. As an untried officer who had yet to face the enemy in action, Birley's intense and evocative characterisation owes a great deal to images of young, titled males about to be thrust into the bloodshed of the English Civil War painted both by his namesake Sir Anthony van Dyck and William Dobson or their later successors depicted after service in the Seven Years' War (1756-63) by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Early in 1943, Meyer was promoted and assigned to the headquarters of the Guards Armoured Division as a General Staff Officer (Grade 3), where he undertook duties which he surprised himself by enjoying. He embarked for service in Normandy on 17 June 1944. As part of Field Marshal Montgomery's Goodwood Offensive (18-20 July 1944), to the east of the city of Caen, Meyer was attached to the Guards Armoured Division Advanced Tactical headquarters, driving across the battlefield in fast but lightly armoured communication vehicles. On the morning of 21 July 1944, he was in his scout car when a German shell exploded close to it. He was hit by shell fragments on the right side of his face and body and evacuated back to hospital in England, wondering whether he would live to see his second child, a son. He finally emerged from hospital in May 1945. However, for the next four years, he often fell seriously ill from the lingering effects of his wounds. He eventually found a post with the Northern Department of the Foreign Office (FO). In July 1962, he resigned from the FO and decided to try for a seat as a Conservative Member of Parliament (MP).

Two years later, Meyer was accepted as a Conservative Party candidate and was elected MP for Eton and Slough (1964-66), West Flintshire (1970-83) and then Clwyd North West (1983-92). He famously stood in December 1989 as 'a stalking horse' for leadership of the Conservative Party against a seemingly unassailable Margaret Thatcher. He only received 33 votes but opened the way for Michael Heseltine to challenge Thatcher in November 1990, which led to Thatcher's fall as Prime Minister and Party Leader.



35.

HUGH FITZROY, AS EARL OF EUSTON,
LATER 11th DUKE OF GRAFTON KG, DL

Signed and dated 1942. Oil on canvas, 105 x 80 cm
Lent by His Grace The Duke of Grafton

Hugh FitzRoy (1919–2011), Earl of Euston between 1936–70, was educated at Eton College and Magdalene College, Cambridge. In 1940, he was commissioned into the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadier Guards, a unit with which Birley's brother-in-law, Colonel Pike, had close connections (he had served with the 2nd Battalion in the First World War and commanded the 1st Battalion in the late 1920s). The sombre background, against which his dark blue military coat is set, creates a similar brooding war time atmosphere to his portrait of Meyer (cat. 34) of the same year. The year after he was painted by Birley, FitzRoy was assigned to serve as Aide-de-Camp (ADC) to the Viceroy of India, Field Marshal Lord Wavell, Viceroy from October 1943–February 1947. A talented amateur watercolourist, FitzRoy was encouraged in this pursuit by the cultured Lord Wavell, who provided him with a studio in the basement of Viceroy's House in New Delhi. FitzRoy had contact with Birley again in April 1945 through the Chamber of Princes (this would be one of the last official portraits of a sitting British Viceroy before the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of an independent India and Pakistan in August 1947).

FitzRoy remained Wavell's ADC until early 1946. Later that year, on returning to England, he married Ann Fortune Smith, daughter of the Chairman of Rolls Royce. For many years thereafter, Euston was closely involved in the conservation and protection of historic buildings: he was Chairman (from 1953) and then President of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, chaired the Historic Churches Preservation Trust and sat on the Board of Trustees for Sir John Soane's Museum in London, as well as being Vice-Chairman of the National Portrait Gallery. In 1961, he unsuccessfully campaigned to prevent the demolition of the Euston Arch (Euston Station and Euston Road were built on land once owned by his family). In 1975, five years after succeeding his father as 11th Duke, he opened Euston Hall, near Thetford in Suffolk (the family seat since 1666) to the public.



36.

STILL LIFE OF A WOOD PIGEON

Signed and dated 1944. Oil on canvas, 39 x 50 cm

Lent by a Private Collection

Although Birley did not paint still lifes very frequently, beautiful still life elements appear in some of his compositions, for example in the portrait of 9th Duke of Rutland (Belvoir Castle, Leicestershire) and his 1944 portrait of *Captain Herbert Buckmaster* (Buck's Club, London).

This painting, reminiscent of the still lifes (*nature morte*) of French painter Chardin, also references Birley's own passion for shooting, which he had pursued from his days as a schoolboy at Harrow. Applying for a commission with the Rifle Brigade in August 1914, Birley's application was supported by a letter from his old Harrow Housemaster asserting that Birley had become a 'first rate shot' through training with a rifle on the School's Cadet Corps Range and that, after leaving the school, he had shown himself to be a highly proficient deer-stalker in the Highlands of Scotland. Between the wars, he often accepted invitations from like-minded friends to their shooting parties in Scotland, the north of England, southern Ireland (Éire) and East Anglia as a form of relaxation from portrait painting duties. Maxime later recalled that, during the Second World War, her father was in the habit of shooting birds such as local wood pigeon to supplement the food available for consumption for his family and to feed passing guests at Charleston Manor – his country home in East Sussex since *circa* 1933. Between 1941–44, Birley found himself spending more time at Charleston, as his London home in St John's Wood was made uninhabitable first from two nearby bomb blasts in 1941, and then from a near miss from a V-1 flying bomb, or doodlebug, in July 1944.



37.

FIELD MARSHAL VISCOUNT ALEXANDER OF TUNIS

KG, GCB, OM, GCMG, DSO, MC

Signed and dated 1946. Oil on canvas, 99 x 76 cm

Lent by White's Club

Harold Rupert Leofric Alexander (1891-1969), came from a landed Anglo-Irish background, and was a younger son of the Earl of Caledon. He took part in the retreat from Mons in August 1914 and, in mid-November 1914, was wounded during the First Battle of Ypres. Alexander returned to France in August 1915 as a Company Commander with the 2nd Battalion of the Irish Guards and was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery during the Battle of Loos (September–October 1915).

Alexander ended the First World War a temporary Lieutenant-Colonel. By 1937, he was the youngest Major-General in the British Army. In spring 1940, he distinguished himself as Commander in France and Belgium of the British 1st Infantry Division. He was the last British General to leave the Anglo-French defensive pocket at Dunkirk in June 1940 before it fell to the Germans. After promotion to the rank of Lieutenant-General, Alexander was posted in January 1942 to take command of all British forces in Burma (now Myanmar).

Alexander was then moved in August 1942 from one crisis point to another, being promoted to British Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, with Bernard Montgomery as his prickly subordinate in command of the Eighth Army. They proved a winning duo against the main German and Italian forces in North Africa, who they defeated at the Second Battle of El Alamein (October–November 1942). Alexander's strategy then secured the surrender of all remaining German and Italian forces in North Africa at Tunis in May 1943. Two months later, he was in overall command of the Allied Forces for the successful invasion of Sicily and for the mainland Italian campaign that followed (September 1943–April 1945). In recognition for his planning of the capture of Rome in June 1944, Alexander was promoted to the rank of Field Marshal.

Birley was commissioned to paint his portrait for White's Club in London. Birley had to complete the painting with even greater dispatch than usual, as Alexander had recently accepted the Governor-Generalship of Canada and would have to be present in Ottawa for the swearing-in ceremony on 12 April 1946. As with many of Alexander's military contemporaries, Birley found it very difficult to read the urbane, insouciant Alexander as a man, or determine whether he had been a truly skilful General, or merely a lucky one. The artist came to the conclusion, evident in his final portrait, that Alexander looked the part of a modern swashbuckling military man suited to 20th-century warfare.

Birley's portrait of Alexander was judged such a success when exhibited with the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in London in January 1947 that the Board of the Imperial War Museum requested a copy (delivered December 1948), as did the Governors of Harrow School (delivered March 1947).



38.
DOVER CLIFFS

Signed and dated 1950. Oil on canvas, 64 x 75 cm
Lent by a Private Collection

This painting is one of a number of charming coastal scenes Birley painted in a manner reminiscent of the more subjective style of early French Impressionism in the spring and summer of 1950 while recovering from a lengthy spell of illness the previous year (Birley developed bronchitis that led to increasing breathing difficulties). He had tried to convalesce and regain his strength with a holiday to Florida from January–March 1950 but, on return to England, relapsed. He found that the bracing air experienced in short walks along the south coast in the vicinity of Seaford and Eastbourne – within a short drive of his country home at Charleston Manor, West Dean – had the effect of reviving him and allowing him to breathe more easily. Between the wars, he had often enjoyed trips to the French Riviera with Rhoda during which he had painted many sketches of the then pristine beaches and sparkling waters of the tiny fishing villages of Saint Tropez, Sainte-Maxime and Saint-Raphaël. In August of the following year, Birley was in the Deal and Dover area to watch Winston Churchill perform a ceremony as Warden of the Cinque Ports.



THE RIGHT HON. WINSTON CHURCHILL CH MP

Signed and dated 1951. Oil on canvas, 76 x 63.5 cm

Lent by a Private Collection

Birley appears to have met Winston Churchill (1874-1965) for the first time at a lunch in July 1934 to honour the former Headmaster of Harrow, Bishop Waldron. He found Churchill impressively loquacious but could not agree with his absolute opposition to any form of self-rule for India. In April 1943, Churchill's cousin, the sculptor Clare Sheridan – who had been a friend of Birley's since *circa* 1919 – suggested to the Prime Minister that he make time to sit for Birley for a portrait. However, nothing came of this idea. It is not clear whether Sheridan made the suggestion at Birley's behest or without his knowledge.

Late in 1944, Birley was approached by the Speaker of the House of Commons, Douglas Clifton Brown, to paint a portrait of Churchill to be paid for by an anonymous Conservative Member of Parliament (who, it later emerged, was Robert Rankin) with the intention that the work go to the House of Commons Art Collection. Birley promptly agreed to the commission, and Churchill seemed enthusiastic about it. However, the Prime Minister was so preoccupied with running the nation's war effort that he was unable to give Birley any time for sittings until after he had been defeated by the Labour Party in the general election of July 1945. Even then, Churchill was still very busy as Leader of the Opposition and he and Birley did not meet for lunch to discuss the portrait until April 1946. Churchill's daughter Mary later noted that her father, after a slightly frosty beginning, quickly warmed to Birley's charm, conversational dexterity and knowledge of art.

The portrait for the House of Commons was painted in June 1946 and Churchill was delighted with it. He and his wife Clementine also got on extremely well with both Birley and Rhoda. The following year, Churchill recommended Birley for a Knighthood, which would be conferred in June 1949.

In April 1951, Trinity House Corporation commissioned Birley to paint Churchill as an Elder Brother of the body. Churchill gave him five days early in August 1951 for sittings towards this portrait, which was completed by the end of the month. During the first two days of sittings at Chartwell, Birley produced a quick head and shoulders oil sketch of Churchill wearing one of his dark blue siren suits, which he noticed had especially impressed Clementine. The artist had been moved that, even wearing such 'unprepossessing apparel' as a siren suit, Churchill possessed a 'rumpled, crumpled' yet palpable dignity and authority that reminded him of the 'old soldiers' painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in his later years.

Birley decided to work this 'hasty' sketch up into a more realised painting to give to Clementine as a Christmas present. His inclination to do so was further reinforced by delight that Churchill was once more Prime Minister, having won the general election of late October 1951 by a narrow majority.



Work on the portrait was delayed when Birley fell ill with bronchitis and then pneumonia. However, he was determined to complete the portrait and this was done by the end of December 1951. He had hoped to exhibit it in Washington, DC alongside his recently executed portrait of General Dwight Eisenhower. However, Birley died before the arrangements could be made. For many years, this painting hung in Lady Churchill's downstairs study at Chartwell and it was one of her most favoured portraits of her husband.



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