

# the HARRIS

Our fine art collection was founded in 1883 with Richard Newsham's bequest to Preston of his remarkable Victorian art collection.

Richard Newsham was a Preston lawyer who purchased work of the most esteemed artists of his time, commissioning paintings by artists like William Powell Frith and David Roberts. He regularly made purchases from the Royal Academy exhibitions and in this way acquired some of the most well known images of the day, such as *Royal Family of France in the Prison of the Temple* by EM Ward and *In the Bey's Garden* by JF Lewis.

As a general rule, Newsham avoided 'difficult' work by experimental artists though he did, occasionally, make exceptions. One of his more unusual acquisitions - and the only one by an artist associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, was a stunning but atypical watercolour by William Holman Hunt, *The Sphinx, Gizah*.

To the present day, the Harris Museum & Art Gallery continues to follow the collecting policy of Richard Newsham, who bought regularly from contemporary artists of the day, from the Royal Academy. In this way a significant collection of paintings by leading artists was built. This includes such paintings as Sir James Gunn's *Pauline in the Yellow Dress* and Gerald Leslie Brockhurst's *Dorette*. This was complemented by the acquisition of more radical work by, for instance, Walter Sickert, Graham Sutherland, John Piper and David Jones.

The museum was helped in this by the Contemporary Art Society which has given numerous works, including Matthew Smith's *Reflections* and Lucian Freud's remarkable *Still Life with Squid and Sea Urchin*. This policy of working with the Contemporary Art Society has continued to the present day.

The iconic painting, and visitors' favourite, *Pauline in the Yellow Dress*, gained an incredible extra dimension with the 2007 arrival of the flamboyant bright yellow dress owned and worn by the elegant subject of the painting.

## Devis Collection

The Devis family of painters, an artistic dynasty which originated in Preston, is well represented at the Harris. Arthur Devis (1711-1787) painted group portraits - a style known as the 'conversation piece'. Often his figures have a stiff, doll-like quality to them, due to his practice of using wooden lay figures when developing poses. He would dress the dolls in miniature suits and gowns, enabling him to complete a painting without the sitter being present. In contrast, his half-brother, Anthony (1729-1816) was a painter of landscapes.

The Harris holds 150 of these landscapes in its collection. Arthur Devis's sons, Thomas Anthony (1757-1810), and Arthur William (1762-1822) practised as portrait painters. The latter, in particular, had a colourful career, working in India recording the lives of ordinary Indians, before returning to England and setting himself up as a painter of portraits and historical scenes.

A catalogue featuring the work of Arthur William Devis is available from the museum shop.

### **Watercolours**

A later, but equally important bequest of 19th century British painting was the Rev John Haslam's collection of watercolours. This increased the collection in English landscape tradition significantly and added important work by Samuel Palmer and JMW Turner, including the latter's spectacular tour de force, *Kidwelly Castle*, Carmarthenshire. Please note this work is not currently on display (watercolours cannot be shown for long periods as they are easily damaged by light).

### **Sculpture**

The sculpture collection is particularly rich in work by the generation of sculptors who rose to fame in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These so called 'New Sculptors' reacted to the classicism of their predecessors by introducing a dynamic realism to their compositions, and working in the more flexible medium of cast bronze. Frederick, Lord Leighton, William Reynolds Stevens, Gilbert Bayes and Alfred Gilbert are amongst those artists whose work represents this movement at the Harris Museum & Art Gallery.

### **Books**

A 12th century English psalter, or prayer book, also came with the Haslam bequest. This jewel like work, containing a series of miniature paintings of musicians and Bible scenes, is significant in its own right but further interest is added by its having once belonged to the Victorian art critic and theorist, John Ruskin. Between the front cover and the fly-leaf, Ruskin scribbled notes on where he acquired the book and on its care. It should, he says, be kept quite tightly closed when not in use to prevent deterioration of the paintings.

The psalter is one of three examples of medieval miniature painting held by the Harris Museum & Art Gallery, the others being a drawing of *Scenes from the Life of the Virgin*, from the Bohemian School, and a large, historiated capital probably from the Spanish School.