

Houghton

Built by Britain's first prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole, profligate heirs sold 204 masterpieces to Catherine the Great. With Russia's Herm
JAMES REGINATO learns how Houghton's current residents, the seventh



HALL IN THE FAMILY

The west front of Houghton Hall, in Norfolk, England; the 106-room house was begun in 1722.

Revisited

Houghton Hall lost its pre-eminent art collection in 1779, when Walpole's
Heritage Museum lending many of them back, for an exhibition in their original setting,
the Marquess of Cholmondeley and his young family, have made a home from history

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eventeen seventy-nine was not a happy year for Houghton Hall. Two hundred and four masterpieces of art—the finest collection in Britain—were pried off the walls of this perfect Palladian palace, in Norfolk, and shipped to St. Petersburg. Catherine the Great, through her ambassador to the Court of St. James's, had swooped in and paid the cash-strapped heirs of the estate £40,500 for the lot (a fortune at the time), pre-empting a sale auctioneer James Christie had been preparing.

Indignation and alarm spread through-

out the English nation. "Russia is sacking our Palaces!" porcelain-maker Josiah Wedgwood declared. In newspapers as well as on the floor of Parliament, the sale was condemned, and an (unsuccessful) public-subscription campaign to buy back the paintings was launched. Though most of the canvases were by Dutch and Italian masters, such as Rembrandt and Veronese, the pictures were akin to national patrimony, as they had been collected by Sir Robert Walpole, Britain's first prime minister, who began building Houghton Hall in 1722.

The rumpus amused the empress when word of it reached her at the Winter Palace in the Hermitage, where she was preparing to hang her new trophies. In a letter she wrote to a friend, one can hear her gloating: "Your humble servant has already got her claws on them and will no more let them go than a cat would a mouse."

How glorious it is, then, when a son restores a family legacy, even if only temporarily. From May 17 to September 29, the pictures are coming home—70 of them, anyway—and they will be hung in their original locations inside Houghton. The unprecedented exhibition, "Houghton Revisited: The Walpole Masterpieces from Catherine the Great's Hermitage," will be open to the public, with whom it is sure to be a hit. It's also pretty sweet for Walpole's descendant David George Philip Cholmondeley, the seventh Marquess of Cholmondeley, Houghton's current resident.

"It was always a thought at the back of my mind to do this, but I never dreamed it would be possible," says the marquess during a chat in the Yellow Drawing Room, one of his many private sitting rooms, a few months ago.

Lined with sumptuous yellow silk, it abounds with treasures—indicating that Catherine clearly didn't get everything. Here, within just a few yards, are major pictures by Gainsborough, Hogarth, and David, as well as a large 1907 portrait by Sargent

of the marquess's great-grandmother Aline, née Rothschild.

Cholmondeley (pronounced "Chumley") acquired the 4,000-acre, 106-room Houghton and his marquessate (plus seven other titles) at the relatively young age of 30, upon the death of his father, Hugh, in 1990. His inheritance included an even larger estate, Cholmondeley Castle, a Gothic extravaganza on 7,500 acres in Cheshire, and a \$191 million fortune. He also took up his hereditary post as Lord Great Chamberlain. As the holder of this ancient office, he is responsible for the conduct of royal affairs in the Palace of Westminster, a main duty of which for centuries has been, while wearing scarlet and gold, holding the white wand of office for the State Opening of Parliament, where he receives the Crown of State (which arrives in its own carriage) and then leads the ermine-draped and heavily jeweled sovereign into the House of Lords Chamber—while walking backward.

"It's a relic of royal protocol where everyone used to go out of the room backwards in the presence of the monarch," Cholmondeley explains. But a few years ago, the etiquette was updated: "The Queen decided we needed to modernize a bit, so I was told to walk forwards. I don't quite see the point of changing it. It's rather a shame—it was part of the pageantry of the occasion, which is all very old-fashioned. But I do now walk forwards."

"Everyone still says to me, 'Oh, you're the guy who walks backwards.' I say, 'I'm afraid we don't anymore,'" he adds a bit wistfully.

Many of the traditions do still endure, however. The thrones used by the monarch and consort remain at Houghton and are delivered to Westminster only for the annual occasion.

Still, Cholmondeley cannot deny that the ceremony is less stressful today, without having to worry about the possible pratfalls of walking backward. For years, he had kept in mind a tip from one of his predecessors, for guidance, involving a statue of Queen Victoria in the Palace of Westminster: "It's helpful if you keep your eye on Queen Victoria's feet. If you're in line with her right foot, you're roughly O.K."

"But once I had the flu and wasn't able to go to the rehearsal the night before. So at the Opening, I forgot that the steps of the throne go out in a certain zigzag way, and my heel got caught as I was walking down, and I nearly fell backwards. The Duke of Edinburgh thought that was quite funny, I could see. He's quite amused when things don't go to plan."

Cholmondeley is more circumspect describing the Queen's reaction. "She doesn't miss anything," he says laconically.

"I can't say it's a very onerous job," he says of the office. His other primary responsibility is to greet "occasional heads of state," but that doesn't happen very often, because few are invited to address both



FORWARD MARCH

The seventh Marquess of Cholmondeley, in his role as Lord Great Chamberlain, leads Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip into the House of Lords Chamber at the 2007 State Opening of Parliament, in London. *Opposite*, David and Rose, the Marquess and Marchioness of Cholmondeley, in a private sitting room at Houghton Hall.

houses of Parliament. "The last one was your president," he recalls. "And before that it was the Pope."

While David Cholmondeley has always executed his duties and cared for his properties impeccably, he managed to carve out an artistic, haute-bohemian life, which he kept fairly separate. Working under the name David Rocksavage (his courtesy title had been Earl of Rocksavage), he directed several well-regarded films, including an adaptation of Truman Capote's novella "Other Voices, Other Rooms."

After attending Eton, Cholmondeley took an apartment in Paris and studied at the Sorbonne. In his 20s and 30s he gained a reputation as a rake and playboy, since he moved with a fast crowd that included Mick Jagger and photographer François-Marie Banier, and he dated actresses and models. But friends say this playboy rep was never deserved. Today, at 52, Cholmondeley is extremely elegant but seems reserved, even shy.

Recently, he became a husband and father. In June 2009, at Chelsea Town Hall, he married Rose Hanbury, a beauty who is 23 years his junior. (The union spurred much talk in London—even more so when Rose's equally lovely older sister, Marina, announced her engagement to another top-drawer fortysomething peer, the Earl of Durham, who came with spectacular properties, too, including Villa Cetinale, in Tuscany; see "The Luck of the Lambtons," *Vanity Fair*, November 2012.)

Later that year Rose produced an heir for the Cholmondeley line—though for a bit of time his identity was unclear to the world. In October 2009, she gave birth to twin boys, 12 weeks premature, who were delivered by Cesarean section. London's newspapers buzzed for weeks over which of the boys had seen the light of day first, and thus would presumably one day inherit the considerable titles and properties. But in due course the birth order was determined, after Alexander, who is known as Xan, was reported to have the courtesy title Earl of Rocksavage, while his brother is Lord Oliver. Their father, however, appears determined to keep

a measure of parity between the boys: "Both boys are being brought up with the name Cholmondeley. The elder is only heir to the title 'Marquess of Cholmondeley,' and to nothing else obligatorily."

With the happy arrivals, the nursery at Houghton is now seeing active duty for the first time in nearly a century. "It's very nice to have a family here. It's the first time there have been young children living here for about 80 or 90 years," says David, who was born and brought up at Cholmondeley Castle. But that's about all he wishes to say about his personal life. "I don't like talking about myself."

"But to do things together, with someone, rather than doing things here alone, as I was

for many years, has been very exciting," he continues when pressed. "It's very nice to have someone to make decisions with, especially someone who has such wonderful taste as Rose. We spark off each other. She has a younger eye and she loves the house. I'm so lucky."

"I loved the house from the first," the new marchioness confirms. "But it was pretty overwhelming to move into it. It felt more natural when we had our children."

Their next-door neighbor is also said to be delighted about Rose's arrival. That would be Her Majesty, whose Sandringham estate abuts Houghton. According to one royal observer, she is pleased that her L.G.C. has at last "settled down."

David's ancestor Sir Robert Walpole is generally described as Britain's first prime minister, but the title did not exist in his



HOUGHTON HALL

FACILITATED POLITICAL ENTERTAINING AS WELL AS FAMILY LIVING.



FAME OF THRONES

(1) Thrones used for the State Opening of Parliament are kept in a stateroom at Houghton Hall.
(2) The Stone Hall, the center of the house.
(3) Photos of the royal family, including Queen Mary (second from left) and the fifth Marquess of Cholmondeley with Edward VIII (third from left). (4) The servants' call box. (5) A view from a guest bedroom. (6) The Picture Gallery.



**“HOUGHTON WAS ALWAYS A PLACE
OF GREAT BEAUTY
AND MYSTERY,”
CHOLMONDELEY RECALLS.**





time. Indisputably, however, this Whig statesman dominated politics during the reigns of George I and George II. Born into a wealthy landowning family in Norfolk in 1676, Walpole rose rapidly. In 1721 he became First Lord of the Treasury, and in this position effectively he became prime minister. He was the first resident of 10 Downing Street—a gift to him from George II in 1735.

Walpole was also a world-class bon vivant and connoisseur, with a prodigious appetite for all the good things in life. Even before he built Houghton, he began assembling his stupendous art collection, which came to include major works by, among others, Rubens, Poussin, Velázquez, and Van Dyck. Although he possessed a passion for art, he realized that other benefits would accrue with his acquisitions, as David Cholmondeley observes: “He wanted to be known not just as a great politician but as a man of taste and knowledge. That the collection became famous was his intention. It was very much part of his image.”

To build a temple to house these treasures, Walpole assembled a dream team of the most talented designers and craftsmen of the day. Architects Colen Campbell and James Gibbs drew up a masterly plan for a Palladian palace—a rectangular block with four cupola-topped domes—which was built of creamy gold-colored Aislaby sandstone.

But the star of the house is really William Kent, the 18th-century virtuoso architect who was responsible for the sumptuous yet spare interiors, including the furniture, much of which he designed. Kent paid special attention to the works of art his client had acquired

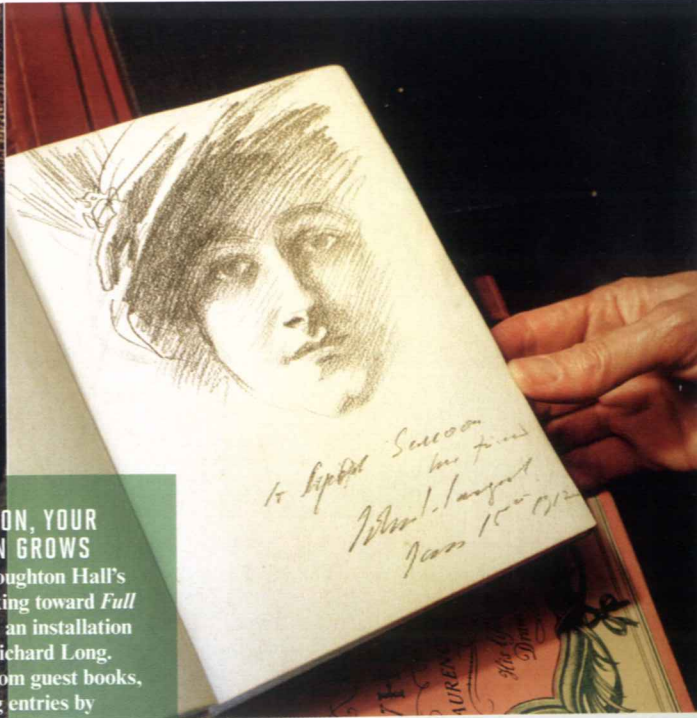
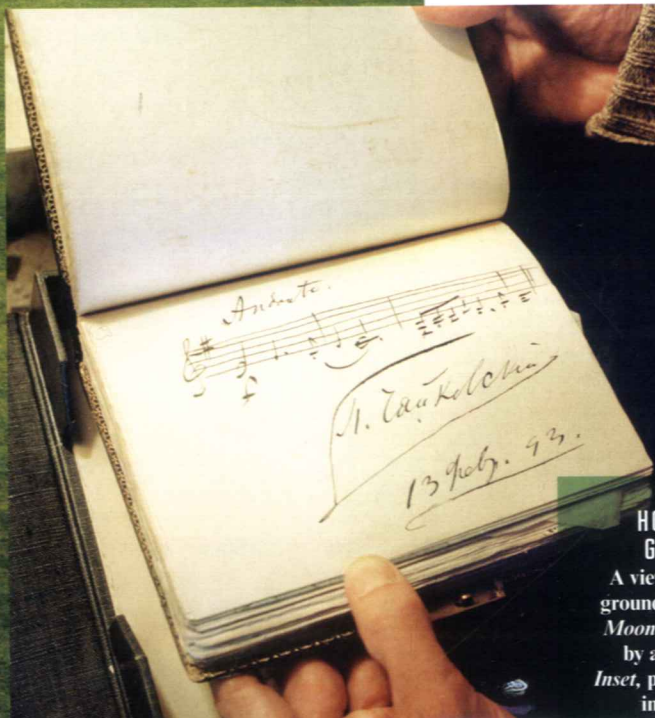
and thus created here one of the most deftly integrated schemes of art and decoration.

Through its ingenious design, Houghton facilitated two functions: grand political entertaining as well as sporty, family living. As Lord Hervey, a keen 18th-century social observer, noted, the “rustic storey” on the ground floor of the house was for “hunters, hospitality, noise, dirt and business,” while the *piano nobile*, above, was “for taste, expense, State and parade.”

Walpole skillfully used lavish entertainments to help achieve his political ends. As Lord Hervey also recalled, a diner at Houghton could expect to find himself “up to the chin in beef, venison, geese, turkeys, etc; and generally over the chin in claret, strong beer and punch.”

Sadly, this level of extravagance could go on only so long; in fact, it went on longer than it should have. Three years after Walpole left office, in 1742—when he was created the Earl of Orford—he died and left a massive debt, about \$75 million in today’s currency. The debt would have hobbled any heir; compounding the problem, Walpole’s grandson the third Earl of Orford was particularly spendthrift. His fecklessness forced the sale of the artworks to Catherine in 1779. Twelve years later, he died heirless, and thus the estate passed into the hands of the Cholmondeley family, being inherited by a cousin, George, the first Marquess of Cholmondeley.

Imposing as Houghton is, George already had the even larger Cholmondeley

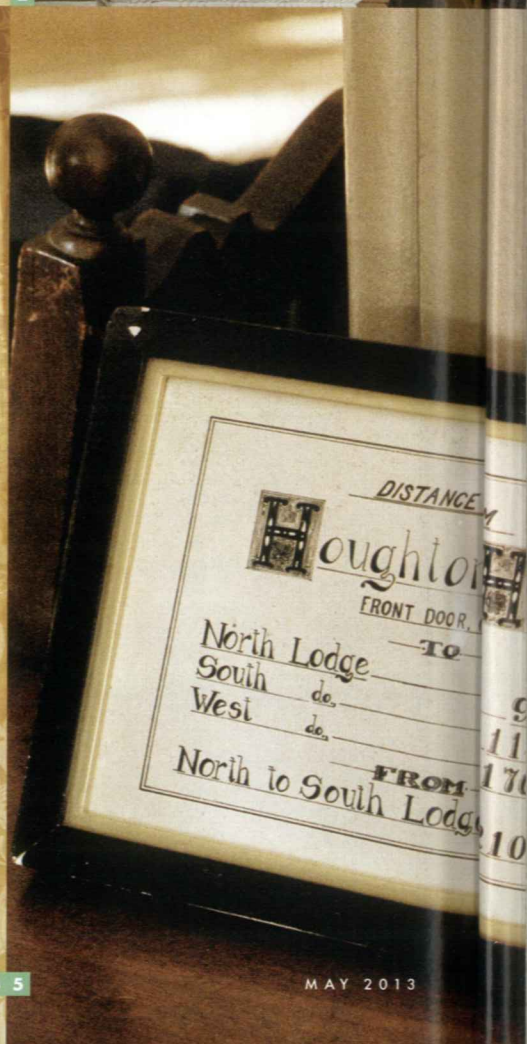
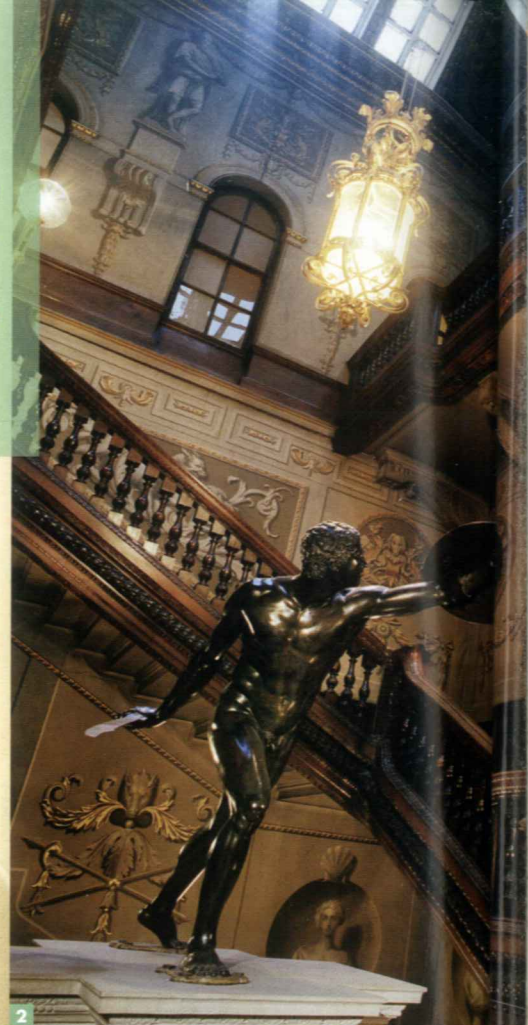
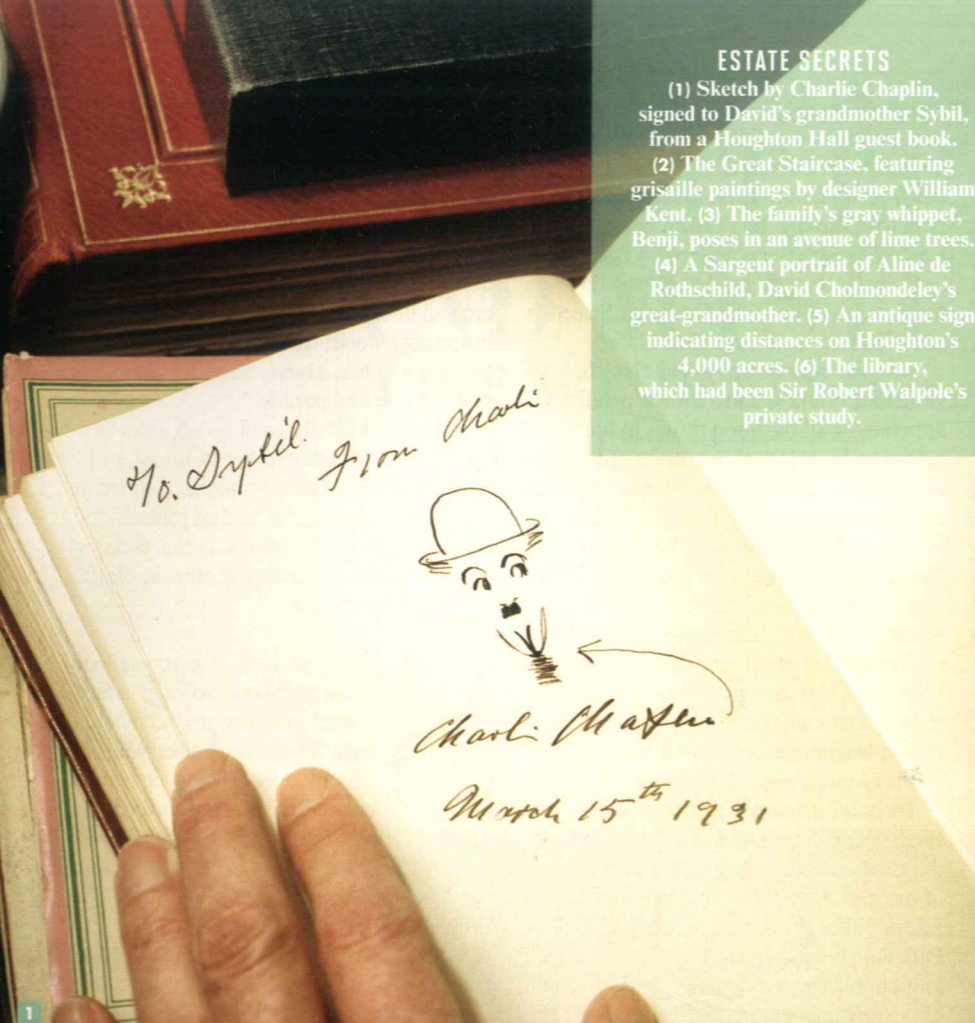


HOUGHTON, YOUR GARDEN GROWS

A view of Houghton Hall’s grounds, looking toward Full Moon Circle, an installation by artist Richard Long. Inset, pages from guest books, including entries by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky and John Singer Sargent.

ESTATE SECRETS

(1) Sketch by Charlie Chaplin, signed to David's grandmother Sybil, from a Houghton Hall guest book.
 (2) The Great Staircase, featuring grisaille paintings by designer William Kent.
 (3) The family's gray whippet, Benji, poses in an avenue of lime trees.
 (4) A Sargent portrait of Aline de Rothschild, David Cholmondeley's great-grandmother.
 (5) An antique sign indicating distances on Houghton's 4,000 acres.
 (6) The library, which had been Sir Robert Walpole's private study.





“EVERY GENERATION HAS TO FIND A WAY TO KEEP THESE PLACES GOING,” CHOLMONDELEY SAYS.

Castle, and it was there the family lived for most of the next century. Houghton was left more or less abandoned, which also meant that it was never altered.

Houghton woke up in 1913, when it was given as a wedding present to David's grandfather the fifth Marquess of Cholmondeley, another George. “Rock,” as he was nicknamed, was one of the most handsome men of his generation. A nine-goal handicap polo player, he was a Wimbledon participant and an all-around fitness fanatic. By now, however, the Cholmondeley coffers were decidedly low. But, in time-honored tradition, George married one of the richest heiresses of the day, Sybil Sassoon, who was the offspring of two great Jewish dynasties. Her father, Edward Sassoon, scion of a long line of Baghdad banking pashas, had married Aline de Rothschild, from the French branch of that fabled family. Thus began a new golden age for Houghton. In addition to loads of cash, the Rothschild and Sassoon families each possessed remarkable connoisseurship. “They wish to get the best of everything,” says David about the Rothschilds. “There is lots of rivalry between the cousins to get the best pictures and so forth. I’m sure that has been a driving force with them.”

Sybil's marriage to a Gentile was controversial at the time—and more so within her family. “They were very upset about her marrying outside the faith,” David recalls. And the Cholmondeleys' attitude? “I should think they were happy to have some influx of...” he says, not quite finishing his sentence.

Aline and Sybil were famously stylish hostesses and salonistes. Their dazzling circle of friends is vividly illustrated in their guest books, which remain in the Yellow Drawing Room and include signatures—often with witty drawings—from the likes of Tennyson, Tchaikovsky, H. G. Wells, Max Beerbohm, John Singer Sargent, Charlie Chaplin, and Thomas Edison.

Sybil remained *châtelaine* of Houghton until her death, in 1989, at age 95. David, along with his three elder sisters, had gone to stay there with his grandmother for three weeks every summer during his childhood. “It was always a place of great beauty and mystery,” he recalls.

By the time of Sybil's death, Houghton's balance sheet was not what it once was. The

Sassoon fortune had long since collapsed. David, at 30, found himself with “double white elephants,” as he recalls. His mother, Lavinia, the dowager marchioness, still lives at Cholmondeley Castle.

But David has proved to be an excellent steward of these estates. “Every generation has to find a way to keep these places going,” he says. After a couple of strategic and lucrative sales—a Holbein went to the National Gallery in London for \$17 million and a Christie's auction of 146 lots from throughout the house fetched \$34 million—Houghton now has a healthy endowment to operate under. And even as he has meticulously cared for the antiques within, Cholmondeley has turned the grounds into one of the most exciting arenas for contemporary art in England. A “sky-space” by James Turrell is one of the works he has commissioned in the past decade.

While about a dozen staterooms are generally open to the public from May through September, the Cholmondeleys have the vast majority of the house to themselves. Throughout the year, they find a way to live amid museum-quality works. “One has to be able to find a happy medium—to keep these things in good condition and to live with them,” says David.

Owing primarily to that century of benign neglect, Houghton retains almost all of its original furniture and decoration, a rarity among Europe's historic private houses. Thus, the return this summer of the pictures brings a one-off opportunity to fully re-create some of 18th-century England's most magnificent interiors.

The genesis of the show came from French-born curator Thierry Morel, who proposed the idea to the marquess a few years ago. Cholmondeley gave Morel his blessing to approach the Hermitage, but the marquess was hardly optimistic. To his surprise, Hermitage director Mikhail Piotrovsky became intrigued with the proposal, and the plan began to incubate. “But there were still quite a lot of obstacles and concerns Thierry had to overcome,” says Cholmondeley.

A number of the pictures are coming from museums other than the Hermitage. Over time some of the works had been par-

celed out to other Russian institutions, such as the Pushkin Museum. A few were quietly sold off. In the 1930s, for example, Stalin allowed Andrew Mellon to purchase a Velázquez and a Frans Hals, which the American financier subsequently donated to the National Gallery in Washington, which is lending both pictures to the show.

Recently, the exhibition (details available at houghtonrevisited.com) received a sterling seal of approval from Prince Charles when he agreed to become its Royal Patron and write the foreword for its catalogue. A number of corporate sponsors, including BP Russia and Christie's, have meanwhile stepped up to help underwrite the substantial costs of the undertaking. (Yankees unable to make the trek to Norfolk this summer will have opportunities to see some of the house's treasures later this year, when “Houghton Hall: Portrait of an English House” is expected to begin an American tour at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.)

Thanks to the diligent efforts of the seventh marquess, Houghton Hall is going strong again. But one can't help thinking that there must have been a lot of bare walls in the late 1700s. In addition to her £40,500, however, Catherine the Great did subsequently send a portrait of herself. Full-length, she stands in her crown and flowing robes, gazing down magisterially.

The picture still hangs at Houghton, over a mantel in the red-damask-lined Saloon. She was no beauty, one can see. The art market has always gyrated and in 1779 it was not strong. Invoices for the paintings Sir Robert bought, which are still in the house, show that the family barely broke even on the *en bloc* sale, compared with what they paid for the works. A bit later, they could have done considerably better.

One wonders what generations of Cholmondeleys have thought when gazing up at the empress's portrait. Did she get a bargain? I ask the seventh marquess. “I should think she did,” he says with something of a sigh. □

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FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

The Yellow Drawing Room features paintings by Jacques-Louis David, Hogarth, and Gainsborough. *Bottom*, artwork from the Hermitage that will be temporarily returned to Houghton for an exhibition, from left: *Portrait of Sir Thomas Wharton*, by Sir Anthony Van Dyck; *The Holy Family with St. Elizabeth and John the Baptist*, by Nicolas Poussin; and *Head of a Girl*, by Peter Paul Rubens.

