

Wednesday 19 May 2010

An Earl and Countess for the NGV



The National Gallery of Victoria today announced two exciting new acquisitions in the lead up to next year's 150th birthday. This is a major gift for the NGV's Masterpieces for Melbourne fundraising campaign.

The new works, titled *Lady Rous née Charlotte Maria Whittaker, second wife of the sixth Baronet later Earl of Stradbroke* and *Rt Hon. John Rous, sixth Baronet, later First Earl of Stradbroke in Suffolk Yeomanry Cavalry Uniform* were painted in 1796 by English artist Sir William Beechey, one of the leading portrait painters of the Regency period.

The portraits are being gifted to the NGV by the First Earl's descendants, the Earl and Countess of Stradbroke, who reside in Victoria. They were formerly at Henham Hall in Suffolk, the family's ancestral seat and one of the masterpieces of the great 18th century neo-classical architect James Wyatt. The house was demolished in 1953. The present Earl's grandfather was Governor of Victoria from 1920 – 1926.

Conservation work has been completed on one of the works, the portrait of Lady Rous, and treatment will soon begin on the portrait of the First Earl.

In a first for the NGV, the two paintings will hang alongside each other, for just two weeks, showing one painting after conservation treatment and one prior to its commencement.

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Gerard Vaughan, NGV Director, said he was delighted that the Gallery is acquiring two major works by Sir William Beechey.

“This is an act of extraordinary generosity from the Earl and Countess of Stradbroke who are giving the people of Victoria this magnificent pair of portraits of the Earl’s ancestors. Their temporary display allows visitors to see at first hand the fascinating conservation process being undertaken here at the NGV.

“It is extremely rare for two full length portraits of this quality and type to be gifted and displayed together.

“When both works are conserved they will form the centrepiece of the forthcoming *Regency Room* of late 18th and early 19th century British art, a special display that will be a key part of our 150th birthday celebrations in 2011,” said Dr Vaughan.

The NGV Conservation department worked on the portrait of Lady Rous for six months, painstakingly removing the layers of dirt, discoloured varnish and overpaint which is typically found in paintings over two hundred years old. This cleaning resulted in a dramatic visual change, revealing the original colours as well as bringing out the brightness of the white dress. Previously hidden details were also uncovered, including an urn in the top left hand corner which was almost impossible to see before treatment.

Following treatment, the portrait of Lady Rous has been returned to its hand carved and gilded frame which is believed to be the original to the work, when it was first exhibited at London’s Royal Academy in 1796. The frame also went through extensive treatment in the NGV’s Frames and Furniture Conservation studio.

The portrait of the First Earl of Stradbroke, which is yet to be conserved, looks similar to that of Lady Rous prior to restoration – and the cleaning process looks to be as equally rewarding.

William Beechey first exhibited at the Royal Academy, London in 1776. In 1793 Beechey was named official portrait painter to Queen Charlotte (wife of King George III) and he exhibited six British royal portraits in 1797. In 1798, Beechey exhibited his enormous group portrait of *George III Reviewing the Dragoons* which earned him a knighthood. Sir William Beechey died in London on 28 January 1839.

The two paintings will be on display for just under two weeks at NGV International, St Kilda Road from 19 May to 30 May 2010, before the portrait of the First Earl goes back to conservation for completion. Admission to the NGV Collection is free. NGV International is open 10am–5pm, closed Tuesdays.

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Image 1 caption: William BEECHEY English 1753–1839 *Lady Rous née Charlotte Maria Whittaker, second wife of the 6th Baronet, later Earl of Stradbroke* 1796 oil on canvas 237.8 x 146.8 cm Collection of Lord and Lady Stradbroke, Victoria

Image 2 caption: William BEECHEY English 1753–1839 *Rt Hon. John Rous, 6th Baronet, later first Earl of Stradbroke in Suffolk Yeomanry Cavalry uniform* 1796 oil on canvas 238.5 x 149.5 cm Collection of Lord and Lady Stradbroke, Victoria