

A World of Private Mystery

The work of John Craxton goes on show at Fitzwilliam Museum

A World of Private Mystery: John Craxton RA (1922-2009)
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge | 3 December 2013 – 21 April 2014

Press View 2 December 2013 | 14.30 – gallery talks at 15.00

Curated by David Scrase, Keeper of Collections, Fitzwilliam Museum
Assisted by Ian Collins, author of the biography *John Craxton*

This winter the Fitzwilliam Museum will present a fresh retrospective on John Craxton – from his beginnings as a young hope of post-war British art, creating dark, meditative images of the natural world, to works of incredible vibrancy, light and colour from his later life in Crete.

John Craxton is appreciated by connoisseurs as one of the great British artists of the 20th century; however, his work is not widely known to the public. This is the first exhibition to explore his whole life; arranged in the Fitzwilliam's Mellon gallery it features a carefully chosen selection of over sixty of Craxton's finest pictures illustrating the constant evolution of his painting.

The exhibition will also feature personal photos reflecting Craxton's many travels and friendships, and will be opened by one of his closest friends Sir David Attenborough.

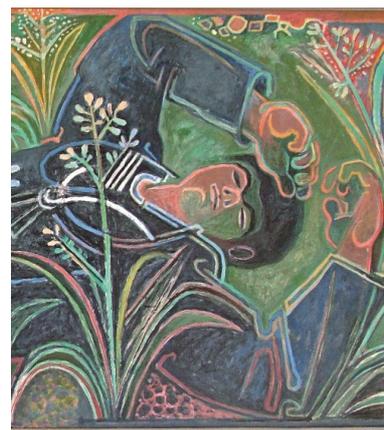
Born into a rather Bohemian, musical family in London, Craxton did not have much formal education. His enlightened parents encouraged his youthful enthusiasms for archaeology and art: he drew, read avidly and listened to adult conversation, developing a natural interest in artistic culture. When he was 14 he visited Paris and saw the international exhibition of 1937 at which Picasso's *Guernica* was exhibited – an artist who would later become one of his greatest inspirations.

At 19 he met Lucian Freud and for much of the War they were inseparable, working and travelling together. In 1943 they were living and drawing near Cambridge, and Craxton wrote presciently: 'the willow trees are nice and amazing, but I would prefer an olive tree growing out of a Greek ruin'.

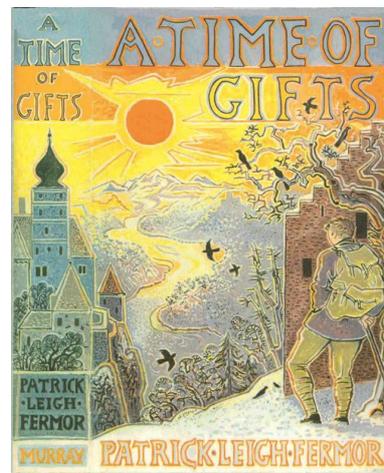
Craxton's early work was dark and brooding: producing desolate images



John Craxton working on *Pastoral for P.W.*, 1948, Photograph by Felix Mann



Reclining figure with asphodels I (detail), 1983-4



Cover for *A Time of Gifts*, 1977



Shepherd and Rocks (detail), 1943

All images © estate of John Craxton

of metamorphic trees, estuaries and meditative figures (dreamers, poets and shepherds). He was linked against his will by critics to the Neo-Romantic movement, although Craxton preferred to think of himself as 'Pastoral'. Throughout his life he refused to be pigeon-holed to a particular artistic movement and his style constantly evolved. His influences included Samuel Palmer, whose work had recently been rediscovered, William Blake, whom he revered and whose monotype of *Satan exulting over Eve* he discovered in a junk shop, and Paul Nash, Miro and Picasso. He was also encouraged by Graham Sutherland, whose work he greatly admired.

Together with Freud he was one of the young hopes of British art, and Craxton won instant acclaim with his first exhibition at the Leicester Galleries early in 1944. Despite this glittering nascent career, Craxton was never fully happy in Britain and dreamed of going to Greece.

All his life he was helped by people who liked his art and adored him for his natural wit, charm and intelligent conversation. His opportunity to go to Greece was provided by the wife of the British Ambassador to Athens, who, when Craxton was in Zurich for an exhibition in 1946, took him there in a borrowed bomber. She also helped to arrange an exhibition of his work in Athens through the British Council.

His early journeys to Greece were to the island of Poros and then to Hydra and in 1947 he visited Crete for the first time. He continued drawing and painting, with regular exhibitions at the Leicester Galleries in London, but it was as a designer that he drew greatest acclaim. He was best known for his illustrations for books and their covers and, above all, as the designer for Frederick Ashton's ballet 'Daphnis and Chloe' (1951).

He travelled widely across the Mediterranean before settling in Crete in 1960. When the Colonels came to power he was exiled from Greece and then visited Kenya in 1970, Tunisia in 1971, Morocco in 1972, and Lanzarote from 1973, until he was able to return for part of each year to a democratic Greece from 1977.

His later work reflected his love of the light and colour of the natural world in the Mediterranean. His paintings took inspiration from ancient Greek history and mythology, and from Byzantine mosaics; above all he evolved a singular, painterly, language of line and colour.

David Scrase curator of the exhibition commented: "When I visited Greece and Crete for the first time in 1964, I realised how perfectly Craxton had caught the light and mood of that most lyrical of landscapes. This retrospective of his life's work shows, above all, Craxton's mastery of line, but it also celebrates him as a man who loved life."

The exhibition is the biggest survey of Craxton since a Whitechapel Gallery retrospective in 1967, and will also include a short film, made by Matthew Thomas for BBC 2's *The Culture Show*, in which Sir David Attenborough traces his love of Craxton's work and friendship with the artist.

Sir David Attenborough, commented: "In Crete John learned what he described as a very salutary lesson for a painter – that life is more important than art. And he certainly relished life to the full. He enjoyed riding across Europe between Crete and London on his Triumph Tiger motorcycle. He loved parties, enjoying them in both embassies and village bars with equal gusto. He loved food – particularly eccentric, unusual food. One of my great pleasures in life was to be taken by John to his favourite harbour-side restaurant in Chania and be given a dish of boiled sea-creatures which even I, who am supposed to have some knowledge of the animal kingdom, found hard to identify."

A world of private mystery: John Craxton RA (1922-2009) is at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge from 3 December 2013 to 20 April 2014. Admission is free.

- Ends -

For further information and images contact the Marketing and Press Office:

Telephone: 01223 332941 | Email: press@fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

Notes to editors:

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

FREE ADMISSION

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00
Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00
CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December and 1 January

The Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge, with collections exploring world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century and outstanding collections of applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian arts.

Welcoming over 400,000 visitors a year, the Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk